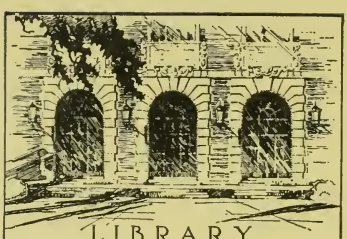

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TIE AND TRICK.

Your affectate Brother
Hawley Smart

TIE AND TRICK

A Melodramatic Story.

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF "BREEZIE LANGTON," "THE GREAT TONTINE," "AT FAULT," "FROM POST TO FINISH," ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TIE AND TRICK.

CHAPTER I.

CROSSING THE STRAITS.

A cross chopping sea and a fresh sou'-wester sweeping boisterously up Channel, a day to make a bad sailor shiver and be profoundly thankful that necessity did not compel him to cross "the Straits." The Calais boat bobs like a cork as it ploughs its way across the capricious, irritable bit of water that lies between it and Dover. A grey November day, presaging that winter is at hand, and conveying grim warning

that another year is near struck from the brief span of our lives; by no means an inspiriting day for a man to look out upon who is conscious of misused opportunities, and that he has been wasting much money on his autumn holiday; moodily reflecting, too, that long-suffering creditors in a few weeks will again anxiously clamour for settlement of their accounts.

A tall soldier-like fellow is Fred Hammerton as he stands, enveloped in a huge ulster, leaning against the lee side of the entrance to the saloon stairs, and painfully conscious that he has spent the last two months in a most unprofitable fashion. It is not that he has any remorse, far from it; nothing but an angry feeling of disappointment pervades his mind. He is simply a gambler returning from an unsuccessful campaign. Commencing life in a cavalry regiment, and with a thousand or twelve hundred a year of his own, Hammerton had about as pleasant a start in life as any young fellow of good

family need wish for; but he was cursed with extravagant desires and a spirit of self-indulgence. When you deny yourself nothing it is possible to prove the insufficiency of any moderate income, and Fred Hammerton had for the last few years led a somewhat hand-to-mouth existence.

"Your country gives us a grim greeting, my friend," growled his companion in English, which, though excellent, had a slightly foreign accent. "It is most detestably cold for the time of year. I hate your sea, too; I never want to smoke when I am at sea—a sure sign it disagrees with me."

"Yes, I suppose it does, though you're not a bad sailor; but when you can't face your cigarette, Count, there's certainly something amiss with you."

"It's a good many years since I was in London," rejoined the Count, musingly; "and then, *ma foi*, it was about the only place in Europe good for my health."

Hammerton looked hard at his companion, a slight, dark, wiry man, of medium height, whose usually well-waxed moustache was now unmistakably out of curl. Count Patroceni was rather a mystery. He was rumoured to be an Italian of good family, who had been engaged in every revolutionary movement on the Continent almost from his boyhood. He was said to have had marvellous escapes from the dungeons of the Bourbons, and even from the executioner's hands; but nobody could put all the shadowy gossip concerning him into circumstantial shape, and the Count was vague in the extreme about his earlier adventures. At present he was known as a man of gentlemanly address, much addicted to play, and mingling freely in a certain class of society. He had a large and numerous, if not very select, circle of acquaintance, but still it was never hinted that Patroceni was an adventurer. If he gambled there was no insinuation that he

was amongst the wolves of the play-table, keenly alive to fattening on the insular lambkin. He had, apparently, plenty of money, and displayed unmistakable ability to take care of it, but no undue desire to possess himself of that of his neighbour. In short, if he played it was apparently as an amusement and not from greed of gain. Hammerton had met him once or twice before on his visits to the Continent, and this time it had ended in Patroceni accompanying him back to London.

"Well, we shall cut our stay in town short. It might be good for your health last time you were there, but it's not a nice place this sort of weather. You told me you shoot; you must come down and try your hand at the Wrottsley pheasants. My uncle will be delighted to see you."

"Let us hope so. I have done plenty of shooting in my own country, but we are near our deliverance," and as he spoke the packet glided under the lee of the Admiralty

Pier at Dover, and speedily commenced the discharge of its small freight of miserable humanity. Green and pallid, these struggled into the train, only too thankful not to be called upon to wrestle with the Customs' officials after the manner of former times, and buried their woes in the recesses of the railway carriages. Our travellers took advantage of the slight halt at the Dover Station to dash across at Hammerton's suggestion to the buffet, and there pull themselves together with a tolerably stiff dose of brandy and seltzer—it is only the young and uninstructed that drink soda, and so much were the pair rehabilitated by this simple and favourite remedy that the habitual cigar adorned their lips as the engine gave forth its final warning shriek of departure.

What motive had induced Patroceni to volunteer to accompany him to England was far beyond Hammerton's conjecture. The Count had merely said it was his whim

to once more visit London, and had simply asked to be allowed to travel with him and profit by his superior knowledge of the city in regard to lodgings, hotels, or what not, and perhaps his dear friend knew one of the more liberal-minded clubs to which it was possible to introduce a foreigner, who, as he (Hammerton) could testify, had received admission to the *cercles* of Homburg, Nice, &c. People who knew the Count thoroughly, and they were few, would have told you very little of his life was uncalculated. What his motive might be was ever a problem difficult of solution, but he was distinctly not given to whims in the ordinary acceptance of the term. Hammerton, a tolerably easy-going man, was under two obligations to the Count: one, that of some slight pecuniary assistance; of the other, more anon. Hammerton smoked on in meditative silence. Both men were absorbed in their own thoughts and keen enjoyment of the tobacco which that malicious sou'-

wester had so long prohibited, to say nothing that not having the carriage to themselves, barred confidential conversation had they desired it. Hammerton—who had some time back found the duties of a profession, for which he had never felt any great enthusiasm, too irksome for his pleasure-loving disposition, was revolving in his mind that the time had at length arrived when the playing of what he had always considered his last card could no longer be delayed. His cousin, Maude Eversley, was a very pretty girl, with thirty thousand pounds of her own, the fortune of her dead mother, which she came into positively when she came of age. Fred Hammerton had known her from her childhood, and had long ago settled that she would make him an excellent wife when circumstances made it expedient that he should settle down, and Fred felt that circumstances had made it of late not only expedient but imperative that he should at all events *settle*.

He was not in love with his cousin, but they had always been capital friends, and he undoubtedly liked no other woman better. To people unaware of Fred Hammerton's disposition and pursuits the engagement would appear suitable enough. The young lady was in her twenty-first year, the gentleman some nine or ten years older, while the world generally could form no idea that Hammerton had run through the best part of his means and was a sorely-needy man. His mode of life gave no indication that he was in difficulties. Men of his stamp never draw in their horns till the crash comes; they neither attempt nor affect the economies, whether it be in the matter of clothes, carriages, cigars, dry champagne, or expenditure. In the use of ready money only are they wont to be reticent, reserving that strictly to meet such expenses as cannot possibly be relegated to the ledger.

Fred Hammerton had found himself an

orphan early in life, with his uncle Sir Jasper Eversley as his guardian, and Wrottsley Hall had been the home of his boyhood. There he had passed his holidays as a schoolboy, there he had passed much of his leave in the days of his military life, and there his room and a hearty welcome remained to him still. He was a great favourite with the baronet, who did not heed vague rumours that sometimes reached him, to the effect that his nephew was in with a very fast set, most of whom were likely to come to infinite grief if they did not moderate the pace at which they were living. Fred was a good all-round sportsman, a fairly good man either to hounds or with his gun, and those were virtues that stood high in Sir Jasper's estimation. What matter if his nephew was a little wild; all young fellows with any spirit in them sowed their wild oats and were none the worse for it when they settled down; and the baronet chuckled with the remembrance that he, too, had

"heard the chimes by midnight," and drank and gambled a great deal more than was good for him, in the days when William IV. was king. Sir Jasper had not married till verging upon the forties, and it had been a matter of deep disappointment that no successor to Wrottsley had been born to him; but his wife, to whom he was devotedly attached, presented him with only one child, albeit they passed some fourteen or fifteen happy years together. The lawyers in their wisdom had settled Lady Eversley's thirty thousand pounds on her for her life, and at her death to be divided between her children. All, of course, now centred in Maude. As for Wrottsley, it was mostly entailed, and would pass at Sir Jasper's death to his younger brother, a clergyman holding a comfortable living in a distant county.

Fred Hammerton knew from many a talk with Sir Jasper that his uncle, although the subject was never openly broached between them, would be well satisfied should

he win Maud for his wife, and make Wrottsley their home as long as Sir Jasper lived; and this, Fred Hammerton, in the plenitude of his conceit and selfishness, thought would do very nicely when it should suit his highness to relinquish his liberty.

Patroceni could hardly have explained his motive in accompanying Hammerton to England even if he would. It amounted simply to this: he had obtained a hold over a man of birth and position, and it was a maxim of the Count's, whenever that happened, it was worth while to see what use you could make of him. It might be none, but it was very rarely that he did not exact a *quid pro quo*, or, to use his own expression, find music for them to dance to. The Continent was getting a little dull, he thought, except perhaps Paris. It would be as well to accompany Hammerton to his own country, to see him amongst his own friends and acquaintance, and then he would be better able to judge what capabi-

lities of usefulness his dear friend possessed. The Captain could, at all events, introduce him to English society to some extent, a privilege which he had not achieved upon his former visit, and he had much curiosity to mix in that London world, of whose wealth and luxury he had heard so much. Perhaps he might win the heart of some blonde English Madam or Miss, and a cynical smile curled Patroceni's mouth as the thought crossed his mind; for, though his manners were soft and polished enough, the boudoir had figured little midst the scenes in which his life had been chiefly passed, and love-tales received scant telling from his lips. Singing of bullet and ringing of sabre had been more familiar to his ears than the soft accents of a woman's voice. He was more at home in the fierce battle of the card-table than in the wiles and manœuvres of the *salon*, and yet the man's keen, subtle intelligence and vast experience of life were calculated to enable him to hold

his own in the latter with the most veteran intriguer.

On arrival in London the pair drove straight to Hammerton's chambers, a luxurious set of rooms which quite admitted of entertaining a guest, and where it had been settled the Count should instal himself for a few days while he looked round for suitable accommodation for himself. Already his host wondered ruefully why he had asked him, and pondered somewhat moodily over the rash promises he had made to introduce him to society and clubs when at Homburg. He was, as before said, under an obligation to him then, and like most men at such times somewhat profuse in gratitude. The promise of these introductions had seemed at the moment to mean nothing, but he had been made to understand lately that they did not admit of retractation, and somehow it did not all seem quite so easy as it did at Homburg. He had been told that the Count was a man

of good Italian family, he had seen that Patroceni enjoyed the *entrée* of the best—albeit somewhat hybrid—society of some three or four Continental watering-places. But then, Hammerton was quite aware London demanded rather more than this before it admitted the stranger within its pale. Ah, well, this is all rapidly changing, the cordon gets looser year by year, the Peris who fretted at the gates at the date of my story are in the midst of the whirlpool now, and some years hence there will probably be but little embargo laid on those able to pay for it—a mere question of whether you are rich enough to know. All this troubled Hammerton not a little; clearly the first thing to be done was to write to his uncle and tell him that he proposed coming down immediately to help shoot the covers, and ask if he might bring a friend with him, a foreign nobleman, who had shown him great courtesy during his trip abroad. There was no difficulty about

this. He knew well what Sir Jasper's answer would be.—"Come by all means, my dear Fred, only too glad to see you; and any friend of yours is, as you know, heartily welcome;" and yet Hammerton felt a strange disinclination to introduce this man under his uncle's roof. He could not account for it; it was nothing more than a hazy, undefined idea that it was not right to bring to Wrottsley any one of whose antecedents he really knew next to nothing. He had no reason to suppose the Count anything but what he represented himself. Patroceni had certainly been very kind to him, and he had no reason to doubt him; but he certainly did wish he had not promised this thing, and he was puzzled to think how he had come to do it. Puzzled, forsooth! it was the soft, malleable mind pitted against the astute brain and will of iron. The ordinary hand grasping the velvet glove and grip of steel. From the time he swallowed that bait of assistance, the jaws

of the rat-trap had snapped upon him little as he wotted of it. However, there was no need to trouble himself about that just now. During the couple of days that would intervene before Sir Jasper's answer could arrive it would be quite sufficient to dine Patroceni at one of his clubs, take him to a theatre, and perhaps introduce him to a few men in the smoking-room. All this commits one to very little; these club smoking-rooms see queer guests at times, men who may be voted very amusing to smoke a cigar with now and again, but men whom the members have not the slightest disposition to see enrolled amongst themselves.

"Now, Count, that we have shaken the dust of travel from our persons," said Fred, as he entered the sitting-room "the next thing is evidently to wash the raw sea-air from our throats, and to recuperate ourselves for the abstinence that abominable crossing usually inflicts. They cook decently at the Harlequin, and their champagne is unim-

peachable, but they're a volatile body and apt to be a little boisterous. At the Blenheim we have even better cookery, their claret is commendable, and the quietude almost depressing. Which shall it be?"

"At best your climate is depressing enough. Let it be the Harlequin, with light, life, and champagne," rejoined the Count, promptly.

CHAPTER II.

WROTTSLEY.

The breakfast hour at Wrottsley was an expansive ten for the community at large, although those intending to hunt or shoot had to be up betimes, and had disappeared before the majority of the ladies, at all events, gathered in the dining-room. A large, low, one-storied house, with a *porte cochère* entering upon a double hall in its centre—the outer and smaller hall was decorated with many a "head," trophies of the prowess of Sir Jasper in Scotch deer-forests in his younger days, and divers other victims of his bow and spear in the guise of

fox-brushes, stuffed birds, &c., and was also strewn with the litter of rough overcoats, hats, caps, and walking-sticks, that the hall of all country houses presents. The inner was very lofty, with a gallery running all round it, and exhibited nothing but its dark-polished oak boards. From this hall doors opened in all directions: on the ground floor to the drawing-rooms, billiard-room, dining-room, &c.; on the gallery to the bed-rooms, lying on either side. In short, the halls formed the centre of the house, while the rooms lay in the wings on either hand.

It was of no great antiquity, but all the more comfortable for not dating further back than the commencement of the century. The apartments were lofty and spacious both above and below; the inner hall, too, was just the thing for an impromptu dance, or for battledore on a wet day. The park, though not very large, was the very place to laze in summer, when the weather was behaving properly: in short,

altogether, Wrottsley afforded the *beau ideal* of country life, tolerably good hunting and shooting, a well-peopled, pleasant neighbourhood, and a courteous, high-bred host. But the glory of Wrottsley was its shrubberies. Shut off by a rabbit-proof wire fence from the garden, the masses of laurels, rhododendrons, azaleas, &c., are thickly populated with game. In the later spring-time, the broad green rides—walks imperfectly describe these fine velvety grass roads—are alive with pheasants, whose burnished plumage glitters in the sunlight; the rabbits skip about in that frivolous, volatile fashion to which their race seem incurably addicted, sitting up on their hind legs washing their faces, turning somersaults in their lightheartedness, pricking their ears in mock apprehension of lurking danger, and finally scuttling off in that state of fuss and bustle that seems to be their normal condition. Anon, a big hare comes lobbing down the ride with long, stealthy strides, gravely

intent upon his own immediate business,—probably on this occasion the getting of his dinner; while the dying rays of the setting lord of day light up a sea of brilliant colour in the shrubberies, now glorious in the fulness of their bloom. But it is a very different scene that greets the sight this mild, muggy November morning; the trees are all bare; the flower-garden, instead of a many-hued kaleidoscope, but a cemetery of nameless graves, as the dug-up beds always appear to one in winter: the pale, wintry sun is so far unsuccessful in his efforts to struggle through the mist; and the rabbits and hares seem to think it no time of year to be about in—a circumstance which the merciless thinning they were subjected to, according to annual custom, some two or three weeks back, perhaps a little contributes.

Standing on the terrace looking up the shrubberies, in earnest converse with a stout, thickset man, whose velveteen and

broad corded breeches and gaiters proclaim him a gamekeeper of the old school, is a tall, slight, well-built gentleman, with aquiline nose and clear grey eyes, who, in spite of grizzled hair and slightly furrowed brow, shows as yet no sign of decay. Just past the middle of his fifth decade, Sir Jasper's figure is still upright as a dart; and if not quite so fast through the turnips in October as he once was, nor quite so dashing a rider to hounds as of yore, his nerve is little impaired, and he is hard to beat yet at either of his favourite pursuits. If Sir Jasper passed the hot days of his youth in all that wild pandemonium that London life presented in the early days of the century, when play, profligacy, hard-drinking, cock-fighting, and the prize-ring were the chief diversions of men of fashion, yet he sickened betimes of the unhealthy life, and betook himself to the purer pastimes of the country. Gradually his visits to the metropolis became fewer and shorter,

and amused him less. If his friends vote Jasper Eversley grown bucolic, and wonder if he calls those things boots, it is affectation on their part, for Eversley is as full of fun and spirits as ever he was, and he never dreamt of forsaking Hoby or having his buckskins made out of London. It was the era of top-boots and breeches, remember. But with Sir Jasper it was otherwise: the town tattle had lost its savour; he detected a recurrence of the old anecdotes that he had laughed at years ago; the hours were too late for him; he had forsworn play, and the whole thing bored him, so that when he married a pretty, thorough country girl, of country tastes, and daughter of an excellent county family, the metropolis saw but little more of him. A few weeks about Epsom and Ascot times amply sufficed for himself and his wife: but even in his country attire, in his ordinary shooting-jacket and round hat, Sir Jasper always bore the unmistakable caste of a London man.

Although attired in the roughest of shooting suits he looks a gentleman every inch of him, this November morning, as he stands there discussing with Chatterson, his head-keeper, the destruction of his remaining pheasants, with a gravity worthy of the solemnity of the occasion.

"We should have six guns by rights. The Captain's coming down, and brings a foreign gentleman with him; that's two, myself three, Mr. Glanfield will be four, Mr. Wheldrake, who I dare say will be back, fifth, and the sixth—but I must see about the sixth."

"Excuse me, Sir Jasper, it'd do no harm if you slipped in a seventh. There's no depending on those furriners; they hit nothing except what they ought not to. If they kill a pheasant you can't find the pieces; they're bound to let off a woodcock, but they're death on foxes if they've a chance."

"Come, Chatterson, we've never had a

foreigner here yet; what do you know about it?"

"Beg pardon, Sir Jasper. One knows a many things one's never seen. I never see a young cuckoo jerk the young hedge-sparrows out of the nest, though I've seen a young step-mother clear her step-daughters off pretty quick. I'm told these furriners are wonderful inexperienced in the use of firearms, as might be expected: they use bows and arrows in their own country, mostly, I daresay. Jeffries, Mr. Costello's keeper, told me they'd a Markee there two years ago whose bag consisted of a fox, a boy, half a pheasant, and the fragments of a rabbit. Jeffries declared he shot at everything, and might have been credited with a couple of cows, and a pig or two, if he could have held straight."

"Jeffries was yarning when he told you that story. Anyway, you know my maxim. I give my guests the best I can of everything, and I can do no more. But a

sixth gun I must have, and whom to ask I can't think."

"What do you say to Parson Pilcher? He can shoot he can, Sir Jasper," exclaimed Chatterson, with all a keeper's enthusiasm and appreciation of a good shot. "Put him next that furrin gentleman and he'll have most of his birds in the bag before the furrin gent's made up his mind to fire at 'em. He's perhaps a leetle, just a leetle, jealous, but he's a sweet shot is Mr. Pilcher—quick as lightning and deadly as nightshade."

This was old Chatterson's mild appraisement of the Rev. Bob Pilcher, as he was usually somewhat irreverently called. One of the quickest, straightest, and most jealous shots in all England; but a very keen sportsman and a most liberal man in the matter of fees, and thereby held in high esteem by Chatterson and all his race.

"Yes, I think he might do, Chatterson; I'll see about it. Meanwhile, remember we'll shoot the Bankside Hangers the day

after to-morrow," and with this Sir Jasper turned to go into the house and communicate the advent of his nephew to his daughter and the party generally, none of whom had appeared when the baronet finished his morning meal.

"Yes, he's a bit jealous, Mr. Pilcher, there's no denying," muttered old Chatterson as his master disappeared. "I mind his blowing that rabbit to bits almost between his toes last year sooner than leave it to any one else."

"Good morning, father," said a tall fair-haired girl, who was dawdling over her breakfast at the head of the table as the baronet entered the dining-room. "Have you any news for us this dull morning?"

"Yes; and tell us," exclaimed a plump, vivacious brunette, about five-and-thirty, "what you propose for our amusement."

Mrs. Fullerton, the lady in question, was the widow of Sir Jasper's younger brother, and spent the greater part of her time at

Wrottsley. She was a great favourite both with her brother-in-law and niece, to the latter of whom she often officiated as chaperon—a lady with plenty of life and go in her, and gossip said quite prepared to resume her chains should any eligible candidate present himself.

"Good morning to you all!" exclaimed Sir Jasper, as he gaily saluted the company. "News, Maudie," he continued, crossing to his daughter, and kissing her. "I've great news for you, child. Fred will be down to-morrow to dinner."

"No; you don't say so," replied that young lady. "I am glad. I haven't set eyes on him for months, and he will have to give strict account of such unpardonable absence."

"Fred never troubles his head about his relations," said Mrs. Fullerton, tartly, "unless it quite suits him. I'm sure I never can get him to dine with me in town when I want him."

Fred Hammerton was not exactly the sort of man to chaperon an aunt to ball or opera from whom he had no expectations, pretty though she might be.

"Well, Clara," said Sir Jasper, always anxious to smooth over the perpetual bickering between his nephew and sister-in-law, "a young man in London with anything like a start must be a precious dull lot who doesn't find his engagement-slate pretty full. I know in my day, except by accident, you weren't likely to catch me under a fortnight."

"No, Jasper, and there were plenty of young women no doubt who would have thought the whole season not unprofitably spent in catching you. Fred's a fool. I've always thought so. A man of his age who doesn't recognise the advantage of cultivating an aunt in good London society must necessarily be wanting in *savoir vivre*."

"Quite wrong about that," said Mr.

Glanfield, a man distinguished for the curtness of his remarks, and who at that moment was employed in devouring ham in the same short jerky manner he delivered his ideas. "Fred Hammerton knows the ropes as well as any one, and is not likely to be blind to Mrs. Fullerton's charms or social influence, but a man about town has a good deal to do in his way, though no one could exactly define it as hard work."

"No," replied Sir Jasper, laughing, "and yet hang me if the hardest work ever I did wasn't the pursuit of pleasure in my early manhood."

"Yes, getting about is a deal of trouble in these days; people crowd so. Seem to want to go everywhere."

"That surely doesn't affect you, Mr. Glanfield," said Mrs. Fullerton. "Whenever I meet you somebody or other's always brought you."

"Somebody's always kind to a poor waif like me," rejoined Mr. Glanfield, contem-

plating an egg sternly through his eye-glass as if he suspected it of too great antiquity.

"By the way, Maudie, I forgot to say there will be another room wanted," interposed Sir Jasper. "Fred is bringing a friend over with him, a Count Patroceni, whom he picked up abroad."

"Patroceni!" said Glanfield, meditatively.

"Do you know him?" inquired Mrs. Fullerton.

"No, no; I certainly don't know him, but it strikes me I've heard the name."

"He's very likely been in the country before," remarked the baronet. "Fred talks of having promised him a day at the Wrottsley pheasants, and foreigners don't take much to that sort of thing unless they have had a little training amongst us."

"I have seen some of them shoot pretty tidily," replied Glanfield. "Patroceni! Patroceni! where the deuce did I hear the name?"

"Never mind," said Mrs. Fullerton, "let us hope he will prove an acquisition. Foreigners are always so lively. By the way, I suppose he speaks English?"

"I don't think he would have fraternised with Fred if he didn't," replied Maude, laughing. "Foreign tongues Fred is not very good at."

"Do you think the Count can talk horse, Mr. Glanfield?" asked the widow, demurely.

"Of course not; foreigners never understand anything about racing."

The pursuit of this pastime seemed to be the end of Mr. Glanfield's existence. It was not that he was an inveterate gambler —far from it; he was simply a passionate lover of the turf, and never missed any of the principal race-meetings. Such modest wagering as he indulged in never caused him a moment's uneasiness. But one curious thing about him was that he never

could divest himself altogether of the taint of the racecourse. His dress was quiet enough, as also was his manner; but he could not keep the shibboleth of the betting-ring and training-stables out of his ordinary conversation. He and Mrs. Fullerton were old friends, and the widow perpetually twitted him on the subject, which he bore with the imperturbable good humour that formed one of his principal characteristics.

Nobody had ever seen Glanfield out of temper, while there were several stories afloat of his marvellous *sang froid* under trying circumstances, as well as of his eccentricities of expression. He had once characterised a pretty girl whom he honestly admired as "Good-looking, free from vice, and quiet in crinoline." It was meant as a high encomium, but the young lady was quite indignant when it came round to her ears, and only to be pacified by the assurance that it was Jim Glanfield for

handsome, well-dressed, and good-tempered. Still he was a popular man, with a large and miscellaneous circle of acquaintances.

It was told of Glanfield also that in a case of an alarm of fire at a theatre he rose and cried in sonorous but deliberate tones, "Pray keep your seats, ladies and gentlemen; the carriages won't be round for half-an-hour." When complimented on his presence of mind afterwards he explained that he meant the fire-engines, and muttered something about "You know when a woman gets her best frock on what a state she gets in about a shower of rain. See 'em on an Ascot Cup Day when the weather proves treacherous."

"With Wheldrake also coming back to us to-morrow we shall have the house full, and be strong enough to shoot any of the covers," remarked Sir Jasper, as the ladies rose and dawdled out of the room in that dilatory fashion people usually do leave the breakfast table.

"What do you think of Mr. Wheldrake, Maudie?" inquired Mrs. Fullerton, as she and her niece crossed the hall together.

"I like him," replied the girl, frankly, as the colour came slightly into her cheeks. "But why do you ask?"

"Because, my dear, I think he seems disposed to do a good deal more than like you. He strikes me as a very nice fellow, and you may go further and fare worse."

"My dear aunt, Mr. Wheldrake has never said a word of that kind."

"Fiddledee! He may not have asked you to be his wife as yet, but he has said a good many words of that kind. He may not have made up his mind to marry, but don't tell me he hasn't let you know he thinks you very nice and admires you extremely. Ah, you needn't speak. I can read that it is so in your face."

"You have no right to say such things," rejoined Maude, as she strove in vain to control her tell-tale cheeks.

"Nonsense, child, there's no harm in a young man falling in love with a young woman even if he don't mean to marry her; but in this case I prophesy the young woman will have her fate in her own hands before many days are over." And with a saucy nod to her niece Mrs. Fullerton entered the morning-room, and sitting at the piano played softly the old air of "*Robert toi que j'aime.*"

Maude glanced at her aunt for a moment, and then, with a menacing gesture of her hand, left the room.

Of course she knew that Cyril Wheldrake had paid her a great deal of attention ever since she first met him at the Bottlesby ball, about six weeks ago. They had stayed in one or two country-houses together, and Maude must have been very blind if she had not observed that he lost no opportunity of throwing himself in her way. He had so far succeeded in ingratiating himself with Sir Jasper as to have obtained an invitation

to Wrottsley, from which he had just been summoned on business to his own home in an adjoining county for two or three days.

Walking up and down the terrace, lost in the enjoyment of his matutinal cigar, Mr. Glanfield stopped suddenly, and, taking his Cabana from his lips, ejaculated, for the benefit of two or three inquiring blackbirds, "Patroceni! by gad, that's the name of the Italian I saw break the bank at Monaco some five years ago."

CHAPTER III.

A RUBBER OF ÉCARTÉ.

"LET me introduce you to Count Patroceni, my dear Maude," said Hammerton, as the two men, clad in the conventional sables, entered the drawing-room just before dinner. A gentleman who ——"

"Has suffered for Italy," interposed Patroceni, a little to his companion's astonishment, who had intended terminating his speech in a very different fashion. "Ah, Mademoiselle, enjoying the blessings of a constitutional government, you cannot realise the miseries of people struggling against the yoke of despotism."

Fred Hammerton in the last few days had been educated to some extent in his friend's Protean nature, but it was with no little amazement he saw him suddenly assume the *rôle* of the exiled patriot.

"There is no mistake about his command of our tongue," thought Maude as she replied, "We are very glad, Count, to welcome you to Wrottsley, and shall do our best to make it pleasant for you."

"If a woman choose to exert herself in that fashion," retorted the Count, with a low bow, "she can make a paradise of a sand-bank."

"My uncle, Sir Jasper, Count," said Hammerton as the baronet entered the room, his throat begirt with a high white neckcloth, that recalled the old days of the Regency,—such an one as was embalmed in the old sporting joke of "twice round and a distance." There was nothing stiff about Sir Jasper in manner, but he adhered to an old-fashioned style of dress which

suited his tall, slight, well-built figure marvellously well.

"Any friend of my nephew's, Count, is welcome at Wrottsley for his sake," said Sir Jasper, as he cordially shook hands. "Before you leave us no doubt we shall welcome you for your own."

"You are too good, Sir Jasper," Patroceni replied. "I own honestly I have a great desire for a glimpse of your country-house life—your *vie en chateau*. I have been such a puppet of fortune from my boyhood that I have rarely seen it even in my own country. Even my own place near Amalfi I have not been at for five years. Hammerton has told me you will show me a day's shooting."

"You shall have a shy at one of my best covers to-morrow, Count, and I can promise a fair show of game."

"You are very kind, Sir Jasper. Should you ever visit Naples I shall beg you to come and have a look at our woods. Stupid I'm afraid you will find it after your English

shooting; but there's the scenery, the blue sky, the novelty, and the obligation you will confer upon myself," and the Count concluded his sentence with a slight bow.

"Ah, Mr. Glanfield, these foreigners read you all lessons on manners. You would never have turned so neat a compliment as that."

"Don't know, Mrs. Fullerton, what you mean by a compliment; but I could have said 'Glad to see you if you come our way' in about half the time, and with about half the bow and scrape of Monsieur le Comte Patroceni," rejoined Glanfield, snappishly.

"It is sad to see how a sample of foreign polish excites your insular prejudices," said the widow, coquettishly.

Mr. Glanfield deigned no reply. He had no belief in foreigners, and always dimly associated their successes on the English Turf with fraudulent practices. He had no specific accusation to make, but held that his country could not be beaten fairly on a

racecourse, a creed stoutly maintained by our neighbours with regard to war. As Frenchmen hint at *trahison* when the tricolour succumbs on the battle-field, so Mr. Glanfield questioned the fairness of their victories at Epsom, Ascot, or Newmarket. A man of this frame of mind was not likely to welcome the alien with enthusiasm.

At this juncture the door suddenly opened, and a good-looking young fellow made his appearance.

"Just saved it, Sir Jasper!" he exclaimed; "in time for dinner after all. I did most of my dressing in the fly as I came from the station. Chisel's suggestion; he's an invaluable valet, and always boasts that he will deliver me in time for anything somehow."

"Delighted to have you back again," said the Baronet, as he shook hands heartily with the new-comer. "I counted upon you to help us to shoot the Bankside Hangers tomorrow."

"I said I should be back to dinner to-day, and Chisel felt his reputation was at stake," rejoined the young man, laughing, as he turned to greet the ladies.

"Ah, Captain Hammerton and Count Patroceni, this is an unexpected pleasure. I little thought, gentlemen, when I parted from you so abruptly at Homburg, that we should foregather at Wrottsley. Indeed, I had not the honour of knowing Sir Jasper at that time, nor the slightest idea, Hammerton, that you belonged to this part of the country."

"Yes, we were rather puzzled at your precipitate retreat. You certainly couldn't think you had fallen among thieves, for we were the plundered."

"Fore George, yes! I was quite ashamed to disappear with such well-lined pockets, but I was called home very suddenly. Never mind, Count, the revenge I promised I have now the opportunity of giving, but I warn you I was born under a lucky star."

"I congratulate you, Mr. Wheldrake," said Patroceni, "it is better to be lucky than wise. The wise invest, while the lucky profit by their investments."

The announcement of dinner here put a stop to the conversation. The party was large, there being several of the neighbours present, whom it is not worth while to particularize as they play no part in this history, but Fred Hammerton was not a little disconcerted to note that Cyril Wheldrake had secured a place next to Miss Eversley, and was evidently upon very good terms with that young lady. Hammerton regarded his fair cousin as his own peculiar property; and had he not just made up his mind to assume the fetters of matrimony? Now an uneasy feeling came over him that Cyril Wheldrake might interfere with this pet project of his, and the thought shot through his brain that he had dallied too long with his opportunities; that, instead of clinching matters when he might, he had

permitted a competitor to take the field, and as he ran over his adversary's cards he was fain to confess Wheldrake held a very strong hand against him. Young, good-looking, and owner of a very nice property in the adjoining county, Cyril Wheldrake was a good match for any girl, and, though Hammerton was not at all the man to undervalue himself, yet, on the other hand, he was not so foolish as to underrate his adversary.

"I had no idea you knew my cousin," said Maude, when everybody was comfortably settled in their places.

"Well, I never met him till this year at Homburg, and had no knowledge of his relationship to yourself and Sir Jasper; didn't know indeed what part of England he belonged to. He always spoke of himself as a thorough Londoner."

"So I suppose he is, but Wrottsley's been his home for all that from his boyhood."

"Very pretty place Homburg, but queer. Have you ever been there, Miss Eversley? Everybody knows everybody, and everybody plays more or less at some game of chance or other. Respectable people who never touch a card elsewhere can't resist having a flutter on the colour at Homburg. It's a tradition of the place. I dare say they'd tell you the waters were no good to you unless you took a little *rouge et noir* or *baccarat* with them."

"Right, Mr. Wheldrake," chimed in the Count, laughing, "and the card-table is good for the patient like the waters in strict moderation. The misfortune is people can control themselves about the one and not about the other. To play to amuse oneself is good, soothing. To gamble, ah! that is to contract the fever that kills."

Mr. Glanfield put up his glasses as he listened to the Count's speech, and then, as he thought over the utterances of the man whom he had seen break the bank

at Monaco, muttered, "I have seen a man give up drink, but I never saw a man give up gambling while he'd a shilling left to stake."

"We did better by having a friendly little game amongst ourselves at the club, Count, than by playing at the public tables, where the odds are avowedly against you, though I am afraid some of you must have thought me as bad as the tables. You see," he continued, turning to Maude, "I happened to be in a run of luck, and was, fortunately for me, summoned home before it had time to change."

Patroceni through dinner won golden opinions from all around him, he was so courteous and deferential in his demeanour, although it soon became evident he was a thoroughly well-informed man of the world. Upon any general topic that cropped up the Count soon made it apparent that he was better informed than his neighbours, and he managed to do this inoffensively, a

gift by no means common; the generality of mankind diffusing their superior knowledge, to say nothing of their superior ignorance, with much arrogance and patronage. Patroceni rarely boasted his knowledge of things, he had either heard so-and-so or read so-and-so, and in his imperfect mastery of a strange tongue had doubtless misunderstood what he had heard or read, and all this while speaking English with perfect ease and accuracy.

A very pleasant, clever, gentlemanly man, thought Sir Jasper, and his verdict would have been in accord with the table generally. Mr. Glanfield moodily murmured to Mrs. Fullerton that "the Count was a little too silky," to which she replied that she had noticed horse-racing was wont to imbue people with suspicion.

Patroceni was frankness itself about how he came to make Hammerton's acquaintance. "It was at the *cercle* at Homburg," he replied, in answer to a question from Sir

Jasper, "after a hand of *baccarat*. I won his money, and thus cemented our friendship. We have always a kindly feeling for those whom we have worsted. I am a little like your gladiators, and always respect and regard the adversary who has worsted me. My friend Mr. Wheldrake, for example, I esteem highly, although he made quite what you call—ah!—a show of us at Homburg."

"He was very fortunate, was he not?" said the Baronet.

"He was in one of those runs we often see. He could do no wrong—cards came to his call. They do to most of us, Sir Jasper, some once or twice in the game of life. Nine men out of ten miss their chance and rail at their ill-luck when they should blame their own indolence and obtuseness. It is possible to hold very big cards and be a very bad player. Most of us are," added the Count, drily.

The conversation was getting a little too

epigrammatic for Sir Jasper, and he refrained from replying.

> "The more the lovers the worse the match,
> Is a fact in a woman's history."

quoted Mrs. Fullerton, deftly.

"Good, Madam," rejoined Patroceni, quickly. "I don't know who of your compatriots wrote those lines, but they are strangely true. It is the women with the best chances who mostly make the worst marriages. I improvise another stanza to it—

> The more the kisses, the more the tears,
> Is a fact in that painful mystery."

Not quite so innocent of the author as he professed to be apparently; but the Italians have the gift of improvising, and Tom Hood's lines have a catch and a swing in them that commends itself to imitation.

"You are quite right, Count. Marriage prompted by passion is always a disappointment. It is drawing out your capital *en*

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masse and leaving nothing to fall back upon; the marriage of convenience is better than that. The marriage of steady regard and esteem best of all to my thinking," and the fair widow shot a rapid glance at Mr. Glanfield, at that time immersed in the investigation of a Stilton cheese and glass of Wrottsley old ale, a compound by no means to be lightly tampered with.

The woman unconscious of her good looks never existed, except in fable. The woman ever conscious of her personal charms is an everyday experience. Mrs. Fullerton was neither the one nor the other. She knew her good points thoroughly, and was quite aware that for a woman well into her seventh lustre she could bear being looked at, and Mr. Glanfield's insensibility to her attractions really was very aggravating. All the more so because it was so evident that Glanfield was not so much wanting in appreciation as in power to express it. To make love to a *guinea-bag* is so easy; to

make love when one's heart is stricken is such a very different matter. How glib come the man of the world's compliments when his feelings are untouched! Let him be hard hit and it may be questioned whether the neophyte has not the best of him.

In the drawing-room Hammerton was no better pleased with the appearance of things than he had been at dinner. There could be no doubt that Cyril Wheldrake hung persistently about Maude, and most decidedly was far from meeting discouragement from his enchantress. Fred had, in the first instance, to do a little civility in the shape of talk to sundry of his uncle's guests whom he had known from boyhood, and if ever there was a gentleman with little relish for social sacrifice it was Captain Hammerton. Wheldrake's obvious attentions to Miss Eversley contributed not a little to increase his irritation, and when Sir Jasper finally insisted upon his making up a whist-table

for the benefit of old Mr. Langridge, the deaf incumbent of the parish, the Captain's disgust knew no bounds. He was too confirmed a gambler to care much about whist at any time, but provincial whist for shilling points made him shudder to think upon. However, it was absolutely necessary that he should keep upon the best possible terms with his uncle, so there was nothing for it but to comply with as good a grace as he could assume.

The drawing-room at Wrottsley was somewhat peculiarly shaped, insomuch as at one end there was a short leg or recess to it running out upon the garden, and terminating in a bay window. The card-table was always laid out in the recess, and there many a stout rubber or pool of *écarté* had been fought out with stubborn determination. There were keen whist-players round Wrottsley of the Sarah Battle school, old-fashioned perhaps, but sticklers for "the rigour of the game," knowing nothing

of the new-fangled asking for trumps, but playing each hand rigidly out, and holding that throwing down your cards, let your hand be what it might, was foolish and contemptible. A crack player from the Arlington, who once did battle in their midst, described them as "just emancipated from long whist," and declared that a tendency to ask, "Can you one?" perpetually quivered on their lips. To a man whose palate had been vitiated by high play the homely rubber of ordinary life proved, of course, terribly insipid; and it was with inexpressible relief that Hammerton saw the evening's tournament brought to a conclusion.

Good nights are said, bedroom candles are lit, the guests depart, and the ladies troop upstairs to their pillows.

"For myself, gentlemen," said Sir Jasper, as the men gathered round the tray which contained the customary decanters and

seltzer water, "I'm off to get a good night's rest. Fred, you will take care of those who wish to smoke; only remember, all of you, Bankside Hangers is worth keeping yourselves in order for."

"Quite right, Sir Jasper, it is," responded Glanfield. "Many a good day I've had there. I shall follow your example. Good night, everyone."

Wheldrake, too, declined the seductions of tobacco, so that the Count and Hammerton were left alone in the drawing-room.

"A cigarette will be refreshing before turning in," remarked the former, as he drew a small silver case from his pocket.

"Where do we smoke?"

"We'll smoke here, Count; the Wrottsley smoking-room is a mere dog-kennel. My uncle, you see, doesn't smoke, and where that's the case the worshippers of nicotine get relegated to strange places; and, just to take the taste of that infernal

rubber out of my mouth, I'll play you five games of *écarté*."

"If you like," replied Patroceni, as he lit a cigarette and took his place at the table. "You have a goodly heritage here, my dear Hammerton," he continued, diligently sorting the packs for their game.

"I? Why I've no more interest in Wrottsley than you have. It will never come to me. Sir Jasper has not the power to leave it me if he wished. You to speak," he observed, as he dealt the cards.

"Mark the king, and play him," replied the Count.

"Oh, Wrottsley will go to Miss Eversley?"

"No, Wrottsley, at Sir Jasper's death, will go to his younger brother, an uncle of whom I know hardly anything. I'm not likely to see much of Wrottsley when he comes into it."

"Rather a bore for you to lose the run

of a good country house like this, with all the sport, &c. which you Englishmen so love. And this Mr. Wheldrake, has he a large country house of his own. If so, it may be good for you; as, unless I am much mistaken, he is *epris* with your fair cousin."

"It looked rather like it to-night, and that is a game I cannot permit him to win at," rejoined Hammerton, sharply.

"Ah! You must take more effectual precautions, my friend, than you did at Homburg. His luck was a good deal too much for such puny efforts as yours," replied Patroceni, with a slight inflection of contempt in his voice.

"Listen, Count, I've a bigger stake on the board this time than ever I had then. Wheldrake is stepping between me and thirty thousand pounds now."

"Two games to me. I should not quite like to stand between you, or indeed be-

tween any one and thirty thousand pounds. It is so likely to be—well, let's say uncomfortable ——"

Hammerton looked at his companion for a moment in an uncertain way, and then suddenly exclaimed, "I can depend upon you, Count, if I should require assistance, eh?"

"My friends can always depend upon me," rejoined Patroceni, with his accustomed suavity. "A game to you. I am two to your one, but the luck's turned, and it is you who will win the rubber."

"Win the rubber? The rubber of one's life, perhaps," said Hammerton, moodily; "and Wheldrake seems to have the best of it, rather, to start with."

"Permit me to observe I do not quite follow you."

"Can't you see? I intend to marry my cousin. She will have thirty thousand pounds of her own as soon as she comes of

age, an event which will take place in a few months."

The Count drew a long breath, apparently swallowed a cloud of tobacco smoke, and then leisurely emitted it from his nostrils.

"I understand," he said, at length, "you know best; but from the very little I have seen I should say you have not returned a moment too soon."

"What! You think ——"

"In my humble opinion our friend Wheldrake is making strong love to your pretty cousin, and Miss Eversley is well pleased at his doing so. I never saw the man to whom thirty thousand pounds was not an attraction. In my country the man who stood between any one and it would find it a sickly season. Gun accidents are common, and I trust nothing of that sort may shock us to-morrow."

"Count!" exclaimed Hammerton, as he turned up the trump card ——

"The king!" said Patroceni; "that's game and rubber to you. Time to retire, my friend. Let us trust that we shall all hold our firearms in the right direction to-morrow. Good night."

CHAPTER IV.

"SHOOTING THE HANGERS."

"MORNING, Mr. Pilcher; morning, sir," exclaimed Chatterson, addressing a slight wiry man attired in a half-clerical but very workman-like shooting costume, as he drove into the stable-yard. "It be a day for the Hangers and no mistake, beant it?"

"Yes, just one of these steamy autumn mornings that blossom into a lovely day. Birds will drive where you like this afternoon, and we ought not to let many of them off. Only show us the pheasants and there should be a good count up about four o'clock. Who's Sir Jasper got?"

"Good guns every one of 'em, bar the furrin gentleman. It ain't likely he can shoot, but I'm going to put him next you, Mr. Pilcher, and perhaps you'll take care of him a bit. Never mind waiting for him, sir," and the keeper favoured the Rev. Robert with a knowing look that conveyed a good deal to the recipient, who was rarely betrayed into the weakness of waiting for his neighbour to take first turn.

"I'll do my best, Chatterson, to cover the delinquencies of those next me, but I must just go into the house and say How do? to the ladies. I suppose you're off pretty soon now?"

"Just as soon as I can get Sir Jasper to give the word. We're all ready; it's the guns is the trouble. Blest if there's ever any getting the gentlemen together."

Upon going round to the house Parson Pilcher found Sir Jasper and his party all gathered under the *porte cochère*. "Glad to see you!" exclaimed the Baronet, as they

shook hands. "You know everyone except Count Patroceni. Let me introduce you. Never mind going in; half the ladies are not down yet, and you'll see them all at lunch. Where the deuce is Glanfield?"

"All right, I'm here and ready," replied that gentleman. "Drop the flag as soon as you like now."

The Bankside Hangers were a series of small covers by the side of a capital trout-stream, and constituted as pretty a day's shooting as any one not an insatiable glutton could desire. The cover at which they usually wound up before luncheon was supposed to offer a pretty crucial test of a man's shooting capabilities. It was called the West Hanger, and the guns were usually ranged in two lines around the end, the crack shots artistically behind to rectify the mistakes of their less certain companions. There was a pretty little stretch of turf running down from the cover's ridge to the stream, which served well to place the

shooters in the first instance, the pheasants usually flying for refuge to a little cover the other side of the brook, and afterwards did well for the *al fresco* picnic it was the custom of Wrottsley to make of the day at the Hangers.

Chatterson placed his guns round an outlying spinney in the middle of a large piece of ploughed land, where it was customary to commence, and then proceeded, with the aid of his myrmidons, to thrash it out. Parson Pilcher was placed between Mr. Glanfield and the Count, much to the former's disgust. Mr. Glanfield had more than once expressed his opinion that Parson Pilcher did not shoot quite like a gentleman. There was no doubt you could expect none of the courtesies of the field from the Rev. Bob. He stood not upon ceremony, but slew all within his reach, without reference as to whether the actual killing of the victim did not more properly appertain to his neighbour. Glanfield, a

very pretty shot himself, disliked having, so to speak, to shoot on the aggressive; and yet, if you did not treat Parson Pilcher in this wise, your own bag was sure to be scanty. It was a perpetual infraction of the tenth commandment, the effort to filch your neighbour's birds.

Now Glanfield, though full of insular prejudice, and brimming over with utterly unfounded dislike of the foreigner, was a very Arab in the way of hospitality, and could not have been discourteous to an alien except under dire provocation, therefore it was with no little disgust that he saw Parson Pilcher after his old fashion knock over a hare almost in front of the Count. Patroceni looked a little astonished and made no remark, but a minute or two afterwards, when a rocketing pheasant came sailing right over the Rev. Bob's head, which that gentleman was waiting to take most artistically, the Count's gun rang out, the bird's wings collapsed, and a ball of

inanimate feathers fell almost into Parson Pilcher's mouth. A loud guffaw from Mr. Glanfield, speechless astonishment on the part of the Rev. Bob, open-eyed bewilderment from Chatterson and his subordinates, with immoveable tranquillity on the part of Patroceni, completed the tableaux.

"I'm ——," murmured Chatterson, "to think of a furriner taking a bird from Mr. Pilcher. I wonder whether he did it a puppus?"

And it was just this latter problem about which Mr. Glanfield marvelled much. Was Patroceni a very fine shot, or was this merely the result of accident? Anyway, there was the opportunity of roasting Parson Pilcher a little, a process which Glanfield knew by experience the Rev. Bob bore with undisguised irritation.

"You're getting a little slow, Pilcher," he said, pleasantly; "it's a great mistake to dwell upon your birds. You're nothing if not quick in these days."

This was preaching to the preacher with a vengeance. The idea of any one giving wrinkles to the Rev. Bob on the better management of a shot-gun. He trembled all over with wrath, and vengefully let drive at a rabbit that was scuttling across Glanfield, which pursued its way uninjured only to roll over to Glanfield's gun full a couple of seconds before Parson Pilcher let fly his second barrel.

"Don't know what's come to Mr. Pilcher," growled Chatterson to his grinning subordinates. "He seems to 'a gone clean off his shooting."

But as the day progressed it became very evident that the killing of that rocketing pheasant had been no fluke. The Count showed himself both a quick and deadly shot, and as regards Mr. Pilcher perfectly unscrupulous about appropriating his neighbour's birds, all the more noticeable from the particular courtesy he observed to his companion on the other side. Nobody could

be more keenly alive to all this than Mr. Glanfield, who did nothing but chuckle over Parson Pilcher's evident discomfiture. The Rev. Bob had most assuredly met his match, and, as is frequently the case under such circumstances, was shooting by no means up to his usual form, consequently enabling his adversary—for such the Count had now tacitly become—to obtain most decidedly the best of him. Mr. Glanfield had no yearning towards foreigners, but he cordially detested the Rev. Robert Pilcher, and expressed much satisfaction at seeing him so decidedly beaten at his own game. He quite thawed towards Count Patroceni, and was prepared to fraternise with him should occasion offer.

At last they arrived at the West Hanger, and Chatterson, although with some misgiving, placed Patroceni on the inner line with Parson Pilcher to cover him and bring to hand all such birds as the Count failed to stop. The ladies by this time had joined the party, and were all there to see the final

rise of the harassed pheasants before lunch. All the morning the sportsmen had driven the birds before them from cover to cover, and this was the pin previous to lunch and crossing the brook.

Mr. Glanfield viewed the arrangement with the liveliest feeling of gratification. He had quite made up his mind about the foreigner's shooting, and chuckled to think that Parson Pilcher was likely to have a somewhat dull quarter of an hour taking care of what Patroceni missed. There was a good show of pheasants, and things turned out just as Mr. Glanfield anticipated. Rocketer after rocketer reached the Rev. Bob as collapsed balls of feathers, having been artistically killed by the Count as they passed over his head, and it was only when Patroceni's barrels happened to be empty that Mr. Pilcher got the slightest chance of taking part in the slaughter. To a jealous shot, such as he was, this was simply maddening, and it was in the bitterness of his

spirit that he remarked reproachfully to the head-keeper at the end of this brilliant burst—

"Well, Chatterson, I never thought you'd have served an old friend such a trick as this. It's bad enough to be put next a rattling good gun, but I can't bear a man who shoots jealous besides."

And Parson Pilcher, who would have described himself merely as keen, was really conscious of most unmerited ill-treatment. Such is the blindness we have to our own failings, for the most part.

"I must congratulate you, Count," said Mrs. Fullerton, as the men joined the ladies by the edge of the stream, preparatory to luncheon. "I don't know how you've acquitted yourself all the morning, but you undoubtedly took the lion's share of the bag at this last spinney."

"I was in luck, Madame. The lion's share of the sport came in my way. It was merely that I did not neglect my oppor-

tunities; I rarely do. It is that which makes success or failure in life. I am afraid, Sir," he continued, addressing the Rev. Bob, without a sign of triumph in his face, "you enjoyed few opportunities."

Mr. Glanfield buried his face in a tankard of claret-cup to hide his emotion, which from the jerking of his shoulders was apparently extreme. Parson Pilcher got perfectly purple with indignation, while Sir Jasper, laughing outright, exclaimed,

"No, Count, I wouldn't give much for *the opportunities* that come after you. If you've missed as few in life as you have pheasants this morning, you must have been a very successful man."

"I might have been, Sir Jasper, had I embarked in any other profession than the regeneration of my country. When you do that you have to depend upon many confederates. To do that is to depend upon the indiscreet, the vacillator, and the fool, as all bodies of men are leavened more or less

with these elements. Pardon, Madame; I only meant what a man can achieve by himself becomes so much more difficult when it requires the co-operation of others." Mrs. Fullerton did not exactly understand what the Count meant, but pictured him engaged in every description of design against the government of his country from that moment, and took quite an enthusiastic view of his character in consequence.

"I never knew you could shoot, Count," observed Hammerton as he lit his cigar after luncheon.

"I have had to learn a good many trades which people would not credit me with knowing," replied Patroceni. "Nothing teaches you to shoot quicker than your dinner depending on it, and that has been my case many a time."

His auditors rather stared, but there was no trace of bombast in the Count's manner, nor did he give any indication of being further communicative, and once more

Hammerton felt a little uncomfortable about the mysterious foreigner whom he had introduced at Wrottsley. Patroceni showed no falling-off in his performance during the day, but infinitely to the demoralization of Parson Pilcher continued to be as quick, deadly, and unscrupulous to the finish, driving the Rev. Bob at length to marvelling whether it was a judgment upon him for shooting next a Roman Catholic, which was, to say the least of it, quite an assumption on his part, deduced from a hazy impression that all foreigners were. Still with everybody but Mr. Pilcher Count Patroceni continued to ingratiate himself.

There was nobody but the house-party that night at Wrottsley; but they got on very merrily both at dinner and in the drawing-room afterwards, with one exception, and that was Hammerton. That gentleman was intensely bored. He had come down for the express purpose of

arranging matters with his cousin, and to his great disgust found that young lady busily arranging matters with somebody else. Fred had for some time past voted the evenings at Wrottsley slow; indeed, they hung heavily on his hands anywhere where high play didn't enter into their composition; but this time he had a purpose in view, a purpose, too, which it was becoming an absolute necessity should be brought to a conclusion pretty quickly, and which it was transparent even to a casual observer like Patroceni he would have difficulty in bringing about. No wonder he was moody and silent, and little disposed to take part in the conversation.

When the ladies had departed, and the men were gossiping round the tray, Hammerton suddenly exclaimed "Let's have a game at cards before we turn in. Do out of charity to me. I can't sleep if I go to bed so early. Come, Wheldrake, you owe me my revenge."

"Ah, anything you like for an hour or two," rejoined Wheldrake, gaily.

"You'll join us, Count, eh, and we'll have a little baccarat."

"I always do what other people do if I can, and any one can play baccarat," replied the Count, gravely.

"And you, Mr. Glanfield?"

"Oh, I'll run," rejoined that gentleman, shortly, "if you don't make it too stiff."

"Then baccarat it is!" cried Hammerton, as he seated himself at the card-table.

CHAPTER V.

HE WANTS ME.

THERE was no immediate harm done by that night's baccarat. The stakes were not ruinous, nor were either Wheldrake or Glanfield gamblers. Hammerton undoubtedly was, while as for the Count it was difficult to say what he was. He had been known as a high player in pretty well every capital in Europe, noted for being perfectly impassive under either fortune, winning or losing with the same steady equanimity; but he always seemed indifferent to the stakes, being apparently quite as contented to play for moderate sums as not. He most dis-

tinctly interposed once when Hammerton suggested heightening the interest, saying that they were playing for amusement, not battling in earnest, and when the evening tournament terminated he and Glanfield rose losers.

But what came about was this; the baccarat became a nightly affair. Hammerton invariably proposed it; Wheldrake, as a winner—for his Homburg luck seemed to stick to him—could only acquiesce, and the others joined in, Glanfield because it did rather amuse him, and Patroceni because, as he said, he always did as other people did. In one thing the Count was somewhat unlike the other inmates of Wrottsley—he was addicted to early rising, and, with the exception of Sir Jasper, none of them could be accused of that failing. He was strolling along the terrace one morning in enjoyment of his eternal cigarette—for Patroceni was an almost ceaseless smoker, when he heard voices in Sir

Jasper's study which arrested his attention, and caused him to pause and listen. He distinguished the tones of Jackson, the butler, and in another moment had caught his words.

"It's not right, Sir Jasper, it can't be right, and I'm bound to tell you about it. The young gentlemen, you know, will have a game at cards before they go to bed. Young gentlemen will, and, what's more, I don't believe they exactly play for sugar-plums. They never did at Wrottsley as far as my memory goes, nor in yours either, Sir Jasper."

Old Jackson was right in his conjecture. Given one thorough gambler in a coterie, and, whatever the stakes may be to start with, play is certain to get high if they continue, and so it had been at Wrottsley. The modest stakes with which they had commenced no longer contented them.

"They will play this new game, backrat, I'm told it's called," continued the old man,

in his measured, deliberate manner. "I play a tidy hand at 'all fours' myself, and I ain't very bad at cribbage neither."

"Now, if you've got anything to say, Jackson, say it at once. I'll take your skill at all fours and cribbage for granted."

"I've been with you, Sir Jasper, man and boy, for a matter of thirty years, and if an old servant can't speak ——"

"I've excellent reason to know he can," interposed the baronet, testily. "Never mind the thirty years, let us pass over that period. Come to what you've to say at once."

"You know, Sir Jasper, I'm just as much concerned about things going wrong at Wrottsley as you can be," replied Jackson, in a wounded voice. "What I've got to say is this. These gentlemen play this backrat with two packs of cards of the same pattern mixed, and I happened to sort these two packs myself this morning. The great card, they tell me, in this game is nine, and

it don't want much of a card-player to know there's eight nines in two packs of cards. Now, how many nines should you say I found in those two packs of cards? Thirteen, Sir Jasper; there were thirteen nines —thirteen nines! There must be something wrong, I take it."

"Nonsense, Jackson," said the Baronet, sharply; "you must be mistaken—impossible. Do you know what you're saying? Do you know this amounts to stating that I have a swindler, a cheat, an unmitigated scoundrel amongst my guests?"

"No, Sir Jasper, I'm not mistaken," replied the butler, doggedly.

"I never join these games, but to-night I'll sit up and look on. Not a syllable to any one, mind. Remember, if there should be any truth in your discovery, the quieter the affair is kept the better."

"You know best, Sir Jasper, but in my opinion a fellow who sits down to pick his friends' pockets at a game of cards ought

to be kicked out of the house; and, —— though I'm getting old, I'd do it myself."

"A fine, old family servant," muttered the Count; "quite useless, utterly incorruptible, and an intense nuisance. *He* will do it; what a fool he is! I warned him at Homburg that a child might detect him, and how he escaped exposure there I can't conceive. It was not likely Messieurs Glanfield and Wheldrake would find him out, but I—bah, of course, I see it every night. My dear Hammerton, you are much too clumsy with your fingers to succeed as a *chevalier d'industrie*." With which reflection Patroceni resumed his walk.

"It seems almost incredible," murmured Sir Jasper, as Jackson left the room, "that I should have among my friends one who would condescend to unfair play. Yet I've seen too much of the world not to know, when one would least expect it, the taint crops up. However, I'll see for myself to-night. I'll look on at their game a bit."

There was to be no shooting that day at Wrottsley. Maude had got up a dance for the evening, to which many of their immediate neighbours were bidden. It was not a ball, but a small, and it was hoped would prove a lively, dance. Miss Eversley had persuaded her father that the men would be fitter for the duties of the evening if they were left to their own devices during the day, instead of being placed under the orders of old Chatterson; and so it had been resolved to give the dogs and keepers a holiday. Patroceni turned the thing over in his mind for some time. Of course he knew that his friend Hammerton cheated at cards; he had detected him at Homburg; and that was what had given him his real hold over the luckless Fred. He had come to him one day after Hammerton had won some considerable sum at cards from him the previous evening, and their conversation, if brief, had been to the point. The Count had relentlessly threatened exposure

unless his losings were promptly returned, and demonstrated his capability of proving his case. Fred Hammerton blustered at first, but quailed before Patroceni's steady determination at last, and made restitution, thereby tacitly admitting the justice of the Count's accusation.

"It is no use, Captain Hammerton," said Patroceni, "my advising you to let tampering with the cards alone in future. Experience teaches me that when a man has once or twice done it successfully no warning will save him from his inevitable doom. You are not the stuff of which the finished *êscroe* is made, and how rarely does he fail sooner or later to come to grief! And you come here amongst all the practised gamblers of Europe to attempt your common-place ruses. Anything more ill-advised I never heard of. Nothing but the chance of your having played with a lot of babes and sucklings at the *cercle* could have saved you from detection long since."

Fred Hammerton thanked the Count, and swore he would never yield to such temptation again, but the desire to neutralise, if not get the better of, Wheldrake's extraordinary luck had proved too much for him at Wrottsley as it had at Homburg.

But the Count had no idea of Hammerton getting into trouble in this wise. The blasting of Hammerton's social reputation would be to take a very useful card out of his, Patroceni's, hand, and the Count had no notion of that. What use it was to be to him he had at present no idea, but Patroceni was not the man to waste a trump, even if a small one. Clear to him, at all events, Hammerton must have warning of this conversation.

The opportunity came in the billiard-room during the morning, where at the Count's suggestion Hammerton found himself doing battle in a game of a hundred up. At the French cannon game Patroceni

took a deal of beating, but he was by no means so at home in the English game, and Hammerton was quite his match.

"I think, my friend, I would be a little sparing in the use of those *nines* to-night, if we play. The bucolic mind is slow to rouse, but pig-headed when it does arrive at an idea. From something I overheard this morning," continued the Count, as he slowly chalked his cue, "I fancy our host seems to have an idea."

"Do you mean," replied Hammerton, with visible trepidation, "that—that—my uncle thinks I play baccarat rather better than my neighbours?"

"I fancy that he and the family butler have arrived at the conclusion there is a little hanky-panky going on at the card-table."

"No matter," exclaimed Hammerton, defiantly, "I'll play those nines to-night again, but in very different fashion. He does not know it, but Cyril Wheldrake has

stepped between me and thirty thousand pounds. He has had the audacity to fall in love with my cousin Maude."

"And, judging from appearances, she with him," rejoined Patroceni, as he made an elaborate cannon.

"It has always, as I have told you, Count, been my intention—not particularly to marry her; but—most decidedly to marry her thirty thousand pounds. You understand."

"I understand that she is a very charming girl, and that, to speak metaphorically, you are a little late for the train."

"Not bad looking," rejoined Hammerton, bitterly. "She represents the discount on the transaction. Now, you can hardly suppose that I am going to let Wheldrake, or, for the matter of that, a dozen Wheldrakes, stand between me and thirty thousand pounds."

"My dear friend, I've the greatest regard for you and the highest admiration for your amiable disposition, but, as I told you before,

I should not like to stand between you and thirty thousand pounds."

"It is getting high time to settle Wheldrake, and if possible it must be done to-night. I shall want your assistance. Listen, my friend, the first time he lands us all at baccarat, and I exclaim, 'By heavens Wheldrake there's no playing against your luck,' you will accuse him of unfair play."

"But, my dear Hammerton, although I hold all to be fair in love as in war, and will assist you to the extent of my power, I can't accuse a man without some grounds. Such a charge as this unsubstantiated would simply ruin me not him, and it is his social destruction you would bring about."

"Certainly. You have called me clumsy with the cards, Count; only help me, do what I ask, and see how I shall play them to-night. Remember I never had a bigger stake on."

"Depend upon me I will not forget my cue, nor be slow to help you whenever I

see the opportunity, but remember this, to ruin a girl's lover is not the way to win her good graces."

"I'm not quite so dull as you deem me, Count. Wait till you see my scheme executed. Game!" he continued, as he made a scientific losing hazard into the top pocket, "and now I'm off to write letters."

"Hum!" mused Patroceni, as his companion left the room. "I've not much faith in Hammerton's powers of intrigue, but I'll take care of myself, and, if there are any chestnuts to be picked out of the imbroglio, it is not Hammerton who will get them," and then the Count proceeded to knock the balls about till luncheon time.

But old Jackson was by no means the only intruder in Sir Jasper's sanctum that morning. A good deal later, indeed about the time Hammerton and Patroceni were playing the above recorded game of billiards, Miss Eversley suddenly made her appearance in a somewhat flustered and embarrassed

state, but for all that she had a bright blush upon her cheeks, she bore a happy smile upon her lips.

"Papa, dear, I want to speak to you," said the young lady, as she sat down.

"Well, Maude, what is it? Anything of importance?"

"Of the greatest importance. I want to know if I may keep this ring."

"Why, who gave it you?" inquired Sir Jasper, as he glanced at the half-hoop of pearls and diamonds held up for his inspection.

"Cyril Wheldrake. And I should so like to keep it."

"A very pretty ring, and I see no particular objection," rejoined the Baronet, laughing. "By the way, Maude, he don't ask for anything in exchange, eh?"

"Now don't be aggravating. Of course you know he does. He wants me."

"So Cyril Wheldrake has asked you to marry him. Well, my dear, I can't say I

was altogether unprepared for this. He's a man of property, and a fine straightforward young fellow to boot. My dear Maude, I give my consent heartily, and my warmest congratulations to boot;" and the Baronet took his daughter in his arms and kissed her heartily. At this moment the door opened, and Mrs. Fullerton made her appearance."

"Oh, dear, what is the meaning of this display of affection?" exclaimed the widow. "I come, Jasper, about a man to put up the sconces for to-night. What, tears Maude! What is the matter? Yes! I do believe Mr. Wheldrake has found his tongue at last. What did he say, child? He must have been rehearsing his speech the last three weeks. It's like reading yesterday's paper."

"Girls must be wooed, Clara. All women must be won," rejoined the Baronet.

"Yes, but in these days of telegraphs and railways we expect it to be done in

somewhat quicker fashion. When *they* have made up their minds to endow us with all their worldly goods they needn't travel by goods train to do it."

"You've no right to say such things, auntie. If Cyril had wooed in such slap-dash manner he might have had No for an answer ——"

"Never mind, my dear, perhaps I'm thinking of my own affairs. We don't all dance to the same step. Anyway, Maude, you've my best wishes for your future happiness."

"Well, Clara, you'd better educate a young man up to your own standard. A young fascinating widow, you've heaps of admirers. Take one of 'em in hand and let's see a model young man of your breaking in. Try Glanfield for instance ——"

"Ah," said Maude, laughing, "aunt is taking great pains with Mr. Glanfield, though not quite in that direction."

"Don't be irreverent," retorted Mrs.

Fullerton, with mock solemnity. "Everybody has a mission in these day. Mine is to protest against the slang of the day. Mr. Glanfield is much improved already by my animadversions on his disgraceful abuse of the language of his country." With this remark and a peal of laughter the widow swept out of the room.

"Does she mean marrying him, Maude?"

"That's very difficult to prophesy about, papa. It's very hard to tell when auntie's in earnest, and then remember Mr. Glanfield is by no means an emotional man. He is a little struck with auntie, no doubt, but whether anything will ever come of it I'm sure I can't say, though I think they would suit each other capitally. And oh, here's Cyril," and as she spoke the door opened and Wheldrake entered the room.

"My dear Sir Jasper, Maude has told you all. Will you let her keep the ring I have given her? Will you trust me with her for life?"

"There is no one to whose charge I would more willingly confide her. She's a good girl, Cyril, and I honestly believe will make you a good wife. Your father and I were staunch friends. May you both be happy."

CHAPTER VI.

"PLAYING THE NINES."

The news of Maude's engagement speedily permeated the house; such news ever travels quick in country neighbourhoods, where small events assume proportions of much greater magnitude than they do in cities. The stone that creates a perfect storm in the pool, thrown into the torrent is hardly noticed. All Wrottsley knew before the evening that Mr. Wheldrake was engaged to be married to Miss Eversley. There was no need to keep the matter a secret, nor was there the slightest pretence made of doing so—indeed, Mrs. Fullerton would have suf-

fered severely had she been called on to exercise such repression. Never had Maude looked prettier or brighter than she did this evening, as she received the congratulations of her friends. That those of the men should come latest was but natural; the male creature is usually slow to understand love-making in which he is not concerned, nor does he deem a girl's engagement of quite the same importance it always assumes in a woman's eyes. She recognises that the step is taken irrevocably which makes or mars her future should that engagement be carried out; that her life-long happiness or misery are sealed in that quarter-of-an-hour that consigns her to the keeping of a stranger. He wakes to that a great deal later, and little dreams how it may influence his destiny. He is not, however, risking his all upon the event; the woman is.

> "Love is of man's life a thing apart,
> 'Tis woman's whole existence."

A lottery in which there are perhaps nearly as many blanks as prizes. Two people covenant to live together for life, only to find they are living with somebody else, and that they have not in the least married the person they thought they had. The seamy side of the character has been carefully concealed on either side up to the steps of the altar.

"By Jove, you know," said Mr. Glanfield, as with Mrs. Fullerton on his arm he left the hall at the end of a valse, and entered the drawing-room, "sort of thing this that knocks one quite over. Wonderful fellow, Wheldrake; enters himself for one of the best stakes of the year, makes all the running, and wins in a canter."

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind putting that in English, Mr. Glanfield," rejoined the widow, suavely.

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Fullerton, I quite forgot. I mean, you know—well, I mean that he cut out the other fellows; and that

he made love to Maude and won her, while the other men were only thinking about it."

"Why don't you take a leaf out of his book, Mr. Glanfield; we women don't dislike a little audacity on the part of a lover."

"No, of course not. Admire a fellow that goes a regular perisher, right off. But won't you sit down?"

"A regular perisher!"

"I apologise!" exclaimed Glanfield, hastily. "I mean that falls in love no end at once. Awful difficult work," he muttered, as he seated himself beside Mrs. Fullerton on the ottoman, "talking to these women—their knowledge of English is so limited."

"Who is this Count Patroceni?"

"I don't know. Hammerton picked him up somewhere abroad. Homburg, I believe, and I fancy has promised to give him a start in London society—not very difficult in these days. A croupier from Monte

Carlo, with decent manners, well-cut coat, and an introduction or two, would make his way."

"Yes; what constitutes intense vulgarity in our own country is voted so interesting in foreigners. Not that the Count is vulgar; his manners are really courtly."

"He's all bow and scrape; but he's not a bad sort for a foreigner. He can shoot, and the way he took the change out of Parson Pilcher that day at the Hangers was simply delicious. But I don't think I'd try him too high."

"Try him too high, Mr. Glanfield!"

"Excuse me, it's a racing expression. I mean ask too much of him."

"You really are insufferable. Racing again," she muttered half audibly; "I declare the man thinks of nothing else."

"Well, I can't help it," he replied, in answer to her half-uttered thought; "there are times when I regret I ever took to it, but there's a fascination ——"

"Ah, Mr. Glanfield," interrupted the widow, "you can't think how delighted I am to hear you say so. I am sure if you would turn the great abilities you possess to the study of higher things you would be certain to ——"

"No, nonsense; do you really think so?" cried Glanfield, excitedly. "I will—I will—I'll go in a regular buster. I can't ride, and I hate hunting, but I'll take a pack of hounds."

"That's his idea of higher things," murmured the widow to herself. "Oh, these men, these men! You don't quite understand me, Mr. Glanfield," she continued aloud. "You might almost as well remain constant to that wretched Racing Calendar."

"Come, I say, don't speak disrespectfully of the Racing Calendar. Where should we be without it?"

"He's very dense," thought Mrs. Fullerton, "but, fortunately, I am very patient and have plenty of time to spare." But

here that lady's further manœuvres were interrupted by her hand being claimed for the Lancers, and Mr. Glanfield was spared further insidious assult for the present. Still his assailant was a woman of energy, who had made up her mind that he would *suit* her, and, to use his own language, he had not a hundred-to-one chance of escape, did he but know it.

"It strikes me, my dear friend," said Patroceni, as he and Hammerton lounged into the dining-room in pursuit of some refreshment, "that, as I remarked before, you're a little late. Wheldrake has won the game while you've been shuffling the cards."

"One game does not make a rubber, Count. Only let luck favour me, and you shall see us ties before the night is over."

"Should I see that, I shall feel interested in watching who wins the trick," rejoined the Count, as he filled a glass of champagne. "To your good fortune, *mon ami*. Have

you made your felicitations on the auspicious event?"

"Not yet," rejoined Hammerton, with a sinister sneer. "I must, as a matter of course, though there will be small subject of congratulation, if I know anything of my uncle, by this time to-morrow."

The music rang out its merriest, and never had Maude felt in higher spirits than as she whirled round the old hall in her lover's arms, to the strains of the Manola valses. She was feeling all that elation which is so often the presage of disaster. The storm-clouds often gather in succession to those very gay mornings, and a delirium of spirits often terminates in a delirium of grief. There is much wisdom in that old Scotch expression of a person being *fey*.

"Mine at last, Maude," said Wheldrake, as he bore his fair partner through the opening into the drawing-room for a minute or two's rest, "and let me plead for an early day. You have never seen Italy, and I

must show you Rome, Florence, Naples, and the buried cities. How often we have talked over Pompeii."

"Oh, that will be delightful! I shall so enjoy a wander through Italy. Let us make quite a long tour of it, Cyril."

"You must not quite forget the old home, Maude," broke in Sir Jasper, who had overheard his daughter's speech. "Nor you, Cyril. One of the first flight mustn't be absent from the country when bridles are ringing and bits champing. Whatever comes, you promise to be home for Christmas."

"Trust me for that, Sir Jasper. Ah, Hammerton," he continued, as that gentleman approached with an evident smile of congratulation on his face. "You have heard of my good fortune. I know we both have your good wishes."

"I have just come to offer them. Shake hands, Wheldrake. In the flush of victory have a kindly feeling for the beaten man."

"What do you mean, Fred?" cried Maude, in open-eyed bewilderment.

"Nothing, nothing," replied her cousin. "If I cherished dreams —— My dear Maude, may you be happy, and for your sake I trust, as I believe, that the best man has won," and Hammerton retired abruptly, with a rather conspicuous use of his pocket-handkerchief.

"It is incomprehensible," exclaimed the girl. "What can he mean? He never spoke a word to me but such as a cousin well might."

"No matter if he did, sweet," rejoined her lover. "If at all events it never dawned upon him that he loved you until he realised that he had lost you, I just now can sympathise with him in the bitterness of his disappointment."

"This won't do, Mr. Wheldrake. It won't indeed," cried Mrs. Fullerton, who at that moment entered the room. "You must pardon my interrupting you, but it's

well-known that, from the moment a girl's engaged till the day she's married, she belongs to *every one* but her *fiancé*. He, as Mr. Glanfield would say, 'takes a back seat'. We can spare you, Maude, no longer. I'm dying to see the ring, *the ring*, you know, and so are half-a-dozen young women, who will have a sleepless night should their curiosity remain ungratified."

"I yield, Mrs. Fullerton," replied Wheldrake, laughing, as he resigned his place on the ottoman to the widow. "Don't abuse my poor bauble if you can help it. I know it is not worthy of her any more than I am."

"There's a mock humility about that speech that augurs ill for your future, my dear," remarked Mrs. Fullerton, with that serio-comic gravity that was one of her greatest attractions, and they were many, as Cyril left them. "No, Maude, don't pout or show temper, but show me the ring."

"Temper, auntie," rejoined the girl, laughing. "I'm in love with all the world to-night, and the happiest girl in England; there's my ring, is it not a beauty?"

"It is pretty," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton.

"It's lovely; it's quite too delicious," exclaimed one or two young ladies who had accompanied the widow from the hall with all that enthusiasm about greeting the conqueror that always characterises the sex, albeit mingled with a *soupçon* of jealousy, when first welcoming one of themselves who has returned triumphant from the war-path, and then the ring was passed from hand to hand, eliciting various expressions of commendation and approval.

"Mr. Wheldrake, I am told I may tender my good wishes," observed Patroceni, as he ran against the young man in the hall. "You will renounce the card-table now; men drop it when they marry—at least for the honeymoon."

"Thanks, Count. I never was much of

a gambler. When I play it is simply out of good fellowship or to pass the time, and I take care I do not play too dearly for my amusement."

"I'm a physiognomist," rejoined Patroceni. "You have the face of one of fortune's favourites, Mr. Wheldrake. It is men like yourself, indifferent to winning, who break banks. I shall be curious to see how the capricious goddess treats you to-night, should we play."

"To-night!" exclaimed Cyril. "Why my star is in the ascendant. Have I not won the prize I set my heart on? Surely, Count, you have not forgotten the old play-axiom 'Follow your luck.' I shall simply ruin you all."

"Perhaps so, but there is another old adage, 'Lucky in love, unlucky at cards.' I repeat I shall be anxious to see whether you falsify it."

But the revel draws to a close, the carriages come round, and, with many pro-

testations of what a delightful dance it has been, the guests take their departure. Old Jackson closes the supper-room, and the house party gather round a table in the drawing-room which has done duty all night as a supernumerary buffet. This table stood near the recess in which preparations for cards had been made as usual.

"You won't desert us to-night, Wheldrake? We count upon you to make up our party," said Hammerton, as he restlessly fingered the cards. "Besides you owe us our revenge."

"All right, Hammerton," rejoined Wheldrake, as he crossed to the card-table. "Five minutes, and, as soon as the ladies have gone, I'm your man; and here's my gage," and as he spoke he threw his note-case on the green cloth, and then turned back to the buffet, where much lighting of bedroom-candles and judicious mingling of seltzer, &c., was in progress.

"Did you see Miss Eversley's betrothal

ring, Mr. Glanfield. It is simply delicious," said the widow.

"I never heard a ring called delicious before. Would you be kind enough to ——"

"Yes, I'll take anything with ice in it," interrupted the widow, tartly. "I believe the man's a fool," muttered Mrs. Fullerton to herself.

"Nice looking, very; got her good points. But uncertain in temper," murmured Mr. Glanfield, softly.

But Sir Jasper, in the fullness of his heart was suddenly inspired with a speech. The country gentleman is not usually great in his oratorical efforts. Sir Jasper's had one merit—it was brief.

"My friends, you all know what has happened—that my girl has accepted Cyril Wheldrake for her husband. I want you, before we say good-night, to drink one glass of champagne to their future happiness. Champagne, Jackson! Here's luck and prosperity to the newly-engaged pair."

During Sir Jasper's speech, and the subsequent hand-shaking and congratulations, the Count, at a whisper and gesture from Hammerton, stepped forward, and so to a great extent masked the card-table at which the former stood. Quick as thought, Hammerton seized the note-case and promptly slipped into it some of those surreptitious cards which it was his miserable madness te use when playing.

"The twig is limed!" he whispered; "don't forget your cue, Count. Here, give me a glass. Maude, I drink to your health—and happiness."

"A bright, merry wedding, my dear, and don't keep us long ere you set the bells ringing," said Mrs. Fullerton, as she raised her glass to her lips.

"You are all so kind; how can I thank you?" replied Maude in a half-tearful voice. "I must leave Cyril to do it. Good night, everyone!" and so saying the heroine of the evening hastily made her exit.

The ladies troop off to bed; Wheldrake and Glanfield follow them out of the room and linger over these last good nights.

"Fortune has favoured me more than I could hope," exclaimed Hammerton, excitedly. "Don't forget your cue, Count, and, strange though it sound, let Wheldrake win but *once* to-night, and he gets up from the table a ruined man."

"You are clever, my friend," replied Patroceni; "I shall await the result of your little comedy with much interest."

"Ah, here you are, Wheldrake," cried Hammerton, as Cyril and Glanfield re-entered the room. "Come and give us our revenge."

"Willingly, but, as I told you before, so I warn you again, it is my day."

"An imprudent statement," said Patroceni; "*take* revenge, but never *give* it. If ever you *should* break the bank at Monaco, remember my advice: instead of letting them take revenge take a ticket yourself for the next train."

"Against a public bank, yes," said Sir Jasper, "but the advice hardly applies to gentlemen."

"Of course not, uncle," replied Hammerton; "the Count's advice only applies to a public gaming-table," and without further comment he commenced dealing the cards. "You to bank, Wheldrake."

They had not been playing more than half an hour before the door was stealthily opened, and Maude peeped into the room. "My ring," she murmured. "I cannot sleep without it on my finger. Auntie says she left it on the table. I would not have Cyril know I had been so careless for the world."

Old Jackson and his myrmidoms had put out most of the lights in the drawing-room before retiring, leaving only those which lit up the recess. Stealthily Maude crept across the semi-obscurity to the small table near the ottoman, where she at once regained her treasure. She was about to retire as

noiselessly as she had entered, when her cousin's voice at the card-table arrested her attention.

"By Jove, Wheldrake, there is no playing against your confounded luck," cried Fred Hammerton, petulantly.

"Will Mr. Wheldrake permit me to observe he drew a card—of course inadvertently—from his case with that last bank note?" remarked Patroceni, suavely.

"Sir, do you know what you are saying?" said Cyril, fiercely.

"A mistake, no doubt," rejoined the Count, quietly.

"Do you dare to accuse me of cheating?" said Wheldrake, as he sprang to his feet.

"An accident, of course, but an awkward one, Signor."

"Sir, I throw the accusation back in your teeth. I produced no card, and you know it," exclaimed Cyril, furiously.

"Absurd, Count, your eyes must have deceived you!" cried Hammerton, starting

up and placing his hand on Cyril's note-case.

"Put that down immediately. How dare you lay hands on my property, Captain Hammerton?"

"Pray be calm, Wheldrake; I am doing the very best I can for you. You surely can have no objection to my emptying your note-case on the table."

"As if any one who knows Cyril Wheldrake could possibly suspect him of anything so shameful!" cried Glanfield, in tones of honest indignation.

"My eyes are good. I have played in most capitals of Europe," rejoined the Count, in the blandest of voices, and with no symptom of irritation, "and learnt to my cost how fortune can be assisted ——"

"Silence, gentlemen!" suddenly interposed Sir Jasper, who had been a silent looker-on at the vicissitudes of the card-table. "Cyril, I am distressed beyond measure that any guest of mine should venture

to bring such an accusation against you. Fred," he continued, turning to Hammerton, "Count Patroceni is a friend of yours. You are responsible for his presence here. I need scarcely say that nothing but the most substantial proofs can make any of us believe this charge against Cyril Wheldrake."

Maude, who had listened spell-bound and breathless to the altercation, stole forward at her father's words. She had gathered enough to know that her lover was accused of foul play by that foreign friend of Fred's, and she inwardly blessed her father for thus taking up the cudgels in Cyril's behalf.

"For heaven's sake be calm, Wheldrake!" exclaimed Glanfield, laying his hand upon the excited man's arm. "We will kick the fellow out of the house in two minutes."

"Empty the case," was Patroceni's sole retort.

By this the whole party were on their

feet, with the exception of the Count, who still remained seated, calm and immovable. All eyes were turned upon Hammerton as he turned out the notes, and, to the horror and amazement of Cyril, Glanfield, and Sir Jasper, three cards with them.

"Sir Jasper, Glanfield, you can't believe ——"

"Liar, was I?" said Patroceni, in sneering tones; "I think not, Mr. Wheldrake, there are three witnesses against you."

"Look at that man!" exclaimed Cyril, as he pointed his finger at the Count. "What object he, whom to my knowledge I never injured, has in plotting my downfall I can't guess. I cannot form a conjecture, but so surely as I stand before you this night, a ruined and disgraced man, so surely am I the victim of treachery. I can hardly hope that any one present will believe my innocence."

Suddenly, like a flash of light, Maude darted out of the obscurity, threw her arms

round her lover, and cried, "I would stake my life on your innocence, Cyril!"

"Heaven bless you for that, my darling. I am the victim of a deep-laid plot, but believe me, Maude, I am as worthy to be your husband now as when I won consent from your sweet lips some hours ago."

"It is time this painful scene was put an end to," said Sir Jasper. "After what has happened you cannot, as a man of honour, hold my daughter to her troth."

"And do you think I would be released from it?" cried Maude, proudly. "Only this morning I promised to marry Cyril. Do you suppose I will abandon him at sight of the first trouble that clouds our sky?"

"No, whilst this stain rests on my character I'll make no girl my wife."

"Oh, Cyril, my love, my love, you are not going to leave me!" moaned Maud, in her agony.

"Yes, dearest, I'll not drag you through the mire that lies before me. Do you think

I could see you pointed at as a card-sharper's wife? I go forth from amongst you to-night a wanderer and an outcast, but the plot will some day be unmasked, and that foreign adventurer seen in his true colours at last."

"Count Patroceni is my friend, sir," interposed Hammerton, hotly.

"I congratulate you on the acquaintance. Good-bye, Sir Jasper. Adieu, my love," and as he spoke he handed the half-fainting girl over to her father. "The game, gentlemen, is not played out as yet. Listen. Like all gamblers you are superstitious. I have a presentiment. We shall play once more, our lives the stake, and it will be my turn to win."

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER THE EXPLOSION.

For a minute or two after Wheldrake's departure there was dead silence round the card-table, broken only by Maude's slightly hysterical sobs.

"Get some water, Glanfield, please," said Sir Jasper, as he supported his half-fainting daughter in his arms, "and as soon as she has drunk a little of that I must get her to bed. It's too horrible! I couldn't have believed it of Cyril Wheldrake."

"And don't now," rejoined Glanfield, as he handed a tumbler to Maude.

The girl said nothing, but thanked him

with a look as she took the glass, but Sir Jasper's sole response was a sorrowful shake of the head. A few minutes more, and, after swallowing a few mouthfuls of water, Maude was enabled, with the assistance of her father's arm, to leave the room.

The three men stood for a few seconds silently regarding each other. Patroceni was the first to speak.

"Adieu, gentlemen," he said in his blandest manner. "It is an unfortunate business; and after the part I have played it is of course impossible for me to remain at Wrottsley. I shall leave early to-morrow morning. I must trust to you, Hammerton, to say my good-bye to Sir Jasper, and to thank him for his courtesy and hospitality. Good night!" and the Count, taking up his bedroom candle, bowed slightly, and disappeared.

"Bad business, very," said Hammerton, as he prepared to follow Patroceni's example.

"It will be most decidedly bad for your

foreign friend whenever I get at the rights of it," replied Glanfield, drily.

"The rights of it, or rather the wrongs of it, were, I regret to say, only too clear," rejoined Hammerton, sharply. "You are prejudiced against foreigners, but you could hardly expect Patroceni to remain silent when he discovered the source of Wheldrake's extraordinary luck, though had he dreamt of Maude being in the room I feel sure he would have continued to suffer in silence."

"Listen to me," retorted Glanfield, as he looked his companion straight in the face. "I've seen a good many robberies on the turf that I didn't understand, but I knew they were robberies. I've seen what they can do with cards at the Egyptian Hall, and I don't hold that 'seeing is believing.' How it was done and why it was done I don't know. What your friend's object was I can't fathom, but that Cyril Wheldrake has never cheated at cards I feel certain."

"Do you mean to insinuate that Count Patroceni ——"

"Stop a moment," interrupted Glanfield. "I never insinuate, and I don't bring accusations against a man's honour till I'm in a position to prove them. I only tell you my firm conviction, as you were present. I don't intend opening my mouth on the subject to any one else. Good-night."

Hammerton took a turn or two up and down the room, then walked to the buffet and mixed himself a pretty stiff dose of brandy and water. He had not been very particular for some time past, but such a shameful piece of villainy as he had this night committed he had never as yet even dreamt of. As he had been spoiled, so had he turned spoiler, and had for some months past resorted to malpractices at the card-table. Differing from Shakespeare on the point, he deemed that "it *was* in mortals to command success," and saw no necessity for deserving it. Still, a man does not own

to himself that he has turned a consummate scoundrel without some pricks of conscience, and, what is more, feeling terrible misgivings when he knows that another is in full possession of his guilty secret. Hammerton, now the thing was done, became conscious that he had placed himself dreadfully in Patroceni's hands. Well, he had got rid of a rival, he reflected, at any rate; it would be for him now to make the most of his opportunity and take care that no one else stepped between him and his cousin. He was a fool not to have clenched matters before. He would strike now as soon as ever sufficient time had been allowed her to get over this affair with Wheldrake. Hammerton had slight belief in woman's constancy, and fancied Maude would speedily teach herself to forget her disgraced lover; still he knew he had a difficult game to play. It was very possible that Maude—even if she allowed Wheldrake to be erased from her memory—

might not set up his—Hammerton's—image in its place; but, thought the Captain, as he gulped down his brandy and water, it is not difficult to so compromise a girl on the subject of marriage as to make it very difficult for her to back out when put to the point.

There were gaps in the ranks at breakfast-time the next morning, which, though not at first perceptible, in consequence of the laxity regarding that meal which generally characterised the inmates of Wrottsley, eventually attracted the sharp eyes of Mrs. Fullerton. Sir Jasper was not there; that was nothing, he had usually finished his meal before the fair widow made her appearance; but both the Count and Maude were absent; Glanfield and Hammerton were unusually silent over their meal, and the latter announced that, business requiring his presence in town immediately, he was compelled to leave by the mid-day train. Mrs. Fullerton scented

mischief in the air; there was a screw loose somewhere she felt convinced. What was it? The widow was not the woman to rest in ignorance on such a question as this. Mr. Glanfield must be made to confess. Of course, he was privy to the iniquity that had broken up the party; for that there had been an *esclandre* of some kind Mrs. Fullerton felt pretty positive. The sudden disappearance of Patroceni, the undisguised uneasiness of Hammerton and Glanfield, convinced the widow something unpleasant had taken place.

"And are you going to desert us?" said Mrs. Fullerton, softly, "What a sad break-up of a pleasant party."

"Yes, I am entered for the midday train, and am a certain starter," rejoined Glanfield.

"Which, being interpreted," remarked the widow, "means, as far as I can follow your extraordinary *patois*, that you accompany Captain Hammerton to London."

"It so happens that we are going to

London by the same train," retorted Glanfield, curtly, "but I am not accompanying Captain Hammerton."

"I thought so," murmured Mrs. Fullerton to herself. "There has been a quarrel of some sort amongst them. Where are Mr. Wheldrake and Count Patroceni?" she continued, aloud.

"They both left, I presume, by the morning train," replied Glanfield, with a malicious smile; "we go by the midday train. The others, no doubt, will follow by the evening mail."

"What others?" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton. But a twinkle in the speaker's eye suddenly informed her of the real state of the case, and it was with the most righteous indignation that she cried, "You are jesting with me, Mr. Glanfield! You can't deceive me! There *has* been a misunderstanding, and I insist upon knowing all about it."

"I have nothing to tell," replied Glanfield, quietly, "or, if you like it better, regret that

I cannot satisfy your curiosity. I am quite willing to admit, Mrs. Fullerton, that something *has* happened, and fear that far too many people are cognizant of the occurrence for it to be long a secret. I shall be only too happy to find myself mistaken."

The grave manner in which Mr. Glanfield said this, together with the utter absence of the *argot* with which he was wont to embellish his speech, struck Mrs. Fullerton forcibly. She not only felt that something had occurred, but that it was a shell of some magnitude that had exploded amongst the party. She had Mr. Glanfield all to herself, the two being now the sole occupants of the breakfast-room; but there was a set look about her companion's face that forbade further questioning, and checked the ever-ready tongue of the light-hearted widow.

Before he left, Glanfield made his way to Sir Jasper's sanctum, nominally to say good-bye, but in reality to request him to

suspend his judgment. No loyaler friend in his trouble had Cyril Wheldrake than Mr. Glanfield: it was all no use; in vain did Glanfield insist upon his favourite theory that "seeing is *not* believing" in these days of science and chicanery; Sir Jasper was inflexible. He held steadily to the one point, that with his own eyes—sad to say—he had seen Cyril Wheldrake convicted of cheating at cards, and that no man with such a stain on his escutcheon should ever wed daughter of his. It was useless for Mr. Glanfield to urge that vision may be deceived; to hint that the foreigner, for some occult reason of his own, had blasted Wheldrake's fair fame. Sir Jasper, like the honest country gentleman that he was, put aside all such high-flown argument.

"It is loyal of you, Glanfield, to stand by him, but I cannot doubt the evidence of my own eyes. It was the saddest evening of my life when I had to acknowledge my girl's lover a simple card-sharper. God

forgive Cyril Wheldrake—not for the night he occasioned me to pass, but for the agony he caused my daughter. Caused!" cried the Baronet, fiercely. "Caused! still causes! Maude is crushed, broken-hearted; to think that any daughter of mine should have her happiness wrecked by such a cur."

"Wheldrake is no cur, sir, and he is no cheat. The day will come when this deception will be exposed, and you yourself will be the first to acknowledge how very hardly he has been treated. Good-bye, Sir Jasper. I sympathise most sincerely with you and Miss Eversley in your trouble, but I also sympathise with Cyril, who, in spite of appearances, I feel convinced is an innocent man."

But Sir Jasper only shook his head as he bade Glanfield farewell. He was sorely distressed at what had happened, both on his daughter's account and that of her *fiancé*. It was not only the terrible blow and humiliation this entailed upon Maude,

but he grieved to think that a fine young fellow like Wheldrake should have so hopelessly blasted his name and forfeited his position. He had seen one or two such cases before, and knew that a man never got over such a fatal charge as that of which Cyril stood convicted.

As for Mr. Glanfield, he was only too correct in his surmise. Before the evening Mrs. Fullerton, and indeed the house generally, were aware that there had been a great *fracas* at the card-table; that Mr. Wheldrake had been detected cheating, and had been denounced by Count Patroceni; that all the gentlemen had gone to town, that Mr. Wheldrake had called the Count out, that a duel had been arranged, and that the four gentlemen were all on their way to the Continent. How this had all leaked out it was impossible to say. Old Jackson, who was by no means without the weakness of garrulity, had probably given the key-note; but these things always do leak out. There

never was a family quarrel yet but the domestics were acquainted with all the details of it, and in discussing it are wont to weave their own embellishments into the telling of the story. So in this case it was most likely the opinion of some bellicose footman that Mr. Wheldrake ought to challenge the Count, and he, therefore, did not hesitate to state that Mr. Wheldrake had done so, after which the adjournment of the four gentlemen to the Continent followed as a matter of course.

Mrs. Fullerton, as soon as the garbled version of the affair reached her ears, went at once to Sir Jasper. She was a shrewd woman, and, without believing the story quite as related to her by her maid, had no doubt that it was in the main true, but she wished to know exactly what did take place. She was much distressed on her niece's account, for she felt sure this was an offence of that nature her brother would be pitiless in dealing with. She knew well that any-

thing of this description was a crime of the deepest possible dye in his estimation, and felt sure that he would never give his daughter to a man lying under such a stigma, and she knew that this would bring much misery to Maude. Mrs. Fullerton knew also that her niece's was no half-hearted love, that the girl was of a warm affectionate disposition, and that no man before Wheldrake had ever ensnared her feelings. She was not the girl to love lightly, but having once parted with her heart was sure to be very earnest in her love. Mrs. Fullerton was quite aware that it would take Maude a very long time to pluck up the roots of her strong attachment for Cyril Wheldrake. Sir Jasper, finding how much his sister did know, at once made her acquainted with the whole story, and also that everything was over between Maude and her luckless *fiancé*.

"It's a miserable business, Clara, and I would willingly for both their sakes have

hushed the thing up had it been possible, but you yourself are evidence that the story is already common property. Besides, how are we to account for an engagement made one day and broken off the next? It's terrible; I have hardly proposed health and prosperity to the young couple before I am compelled to turn my intended son-in-law out of the house. We have had barely time to tell people there is a wedding in prospect before we are obliged to deny it. Such a fine young fellow too! What madness possessed him?"

"It is inexplicable," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "He's the last man I should ever have suspected of anything mean or underhand. Still, you say Mr. Glanfield believes in him?"

"Yes, Glanfield, in his loyal friendship to Cyril, refuses to believe the evidence of his senses. But don't build upon that, Clara, and, above all, don't let Maude know it."

"Mr. Glanfield is no fool, although he

does go racing," replied Mrs. Fullerton, musingly; "and, to use one of his own absurd expressions, 'straight as a line.'"

"I thought you were to teach him to drop slang. It strikes me he's corrupting you," retorted Sir Jasper, with a smile.

"I don't think," continued Mrs. Fullerton, without noticing the interruption, "that he would stand up for a friend even, if he considered him in the wrong."

"His friendship closes his eyes to facts."

"I can't give you any reason for it, but I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Glanfield turned out to be right."

"Don't delude yourself with the idea, and pray don't put it into Maude's head."

"Oh, dear, it wants no putting there. Why, you don't suppose, Jasper, you can make her believe that Mr. Wheldrake is guilty. No, you can forbid her to marry him, and I suppose you must, under the circumstances, but you can't make her believe that her lover has done anything

wrong. A girl takes a good deal of convincing on that point, even when the man himself is doing his best to make her mistrust him. She will feel it very much, Jasper. You have no idea how very much attached to him she is."

"I wish to heaven she had never seen him," replied the Baronet, irritably, to which Mrs. Fullerton deigned no reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

"THE COUNT NAMES HIS PRICE."

COULD Hammerton have been made acquainted with Patroceni's reflections on his way to town he might well have had misgivings about having placed himself so completely in the Count's power. That gentleman was indeed turning over in his own mind how to exact the most for the very questionable service he had rendered his friend. "It is not to be supposed," mused the Count, "that I am to lose the *entrée* of a capital country-house—for, of course, I shall never again be asked to Wrottsley, and be the chief instrument in

blasting the character of a man against whom I have no cause of quarrel—for nothing. I'm not at all particular, but it can't be supposed that one assists in such very dirty work as this for nothing. My friend, Hammerton, you will find that, though an able, I am a somewhat expensive, coadjutor. The great question is what can you afford to pay in either money or kind. I must think, my dear friend, I must think."

The result of the Count's cogitations was that the next day Hammerton received a visit at his rooms in the Albany from Patroceni.

"I wonder what brings him here," muttered the Captain, as he glanced at the Count's card; "and what it is he wants to see me for? Show the gentleman in, William. Ah, Count, this is an unexpected pleasure. Charmed to see you; looked forward to meeting you to-night at the Harlequin."

"I could not resist the temptation of con-

gratulating you on the success of your little comedy."

"Well, Count!" cried Hammerton, exultingly, "I told you I should score the second game. What do you say now to my tactics? I was sorry to sacrifice Wheldrake, a fine young fellow with a nice fortune, in the prime of early manhood. He would have been worth a good many hundreds to you and me, and but little the worse for losing a few of his quill-feathers. However, the fool must needs fall in love and come between me and thirty thousand pounds."

"Ah! you have disposed of him. As a foreigner, perhaps, I do not understand your world, but if this thing is known, talked about, I presume Mr. Wheldrake is socially ruined."

"Yes. I don't mean to appear in it, but I shall take care it is known. His club will request him to resign. They must. The customs of society are much the same

throughout Europe, and the whispers of club-land travel far. Wheldrake is socially ruined."

"It is clever, very clever, my dear friend. You have, undoubtedly, disposed of a favoured rival, but, mark me, degrading a lover in a woman's sight never yet recommended a man to her good graces."

"Oh, fie, Count; our foggy island has bemused your brains. My work is not so clumsily done as that. Why did I make you my confederate? Don't you see that in Maude's eyes it is you who exposed her lover. Don't you see that Glanfield and Wheldrake regard the treachery they suspect, but cannot understand, as yours?"

"You are right; I am dull. Forgive me, my friend, I overlooked that little circumstance. Is it permitted to ask what is your next move?"

"Certainly, Count," replied Hammerton, as he pushed a cigarette-case across the table to Patroceni. "It is very simple: I

appear everywhere with my uncle and cousin. In a short time I flood the Society papers with paragraphs. 'We understand that a marriage has been arranged.' 'We are authorised to state that Captain Hammerton will shortly lead to the hymeneal altar Maude, only daughter of Sir Jasper Eversley,' &c. &c. You comprehend: before the girl knows where she is, she will be compromised in the eyes of the world. I am congratulated. Of course, I deny there is any truth in it, but in such a way as means it is not officially announced; and, Count, you and I know that a woman, smarting under such a disappointment as my cousin's, has been often won in such fashion."

"Clever, yes, decidedly clever; your scheme, my friend, is very ingenious; permit me to point out one flaw in it."

"Certainly," rejoined Hammerton, eagerly; "any suggestion of yours I shall be only too glad to take advantage of."

The Count threw himself back in his chair, emitted a thin cloud of smoke from under his moustache, and then said, quietly, "You don't seem to have considered me."

"You," replied Hammerton, in utter bewilderment. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Ah! it is you now, my dear Hammerton, who are a little dense," rejoined the Count, smiling. "My excellent friend, to assist you to win the hand of a charming girl with thirty thousand pounds (seven hundred and fifty thousand francs) I submit to figure in the most atrocious light in her eyes and those of another worthy gentleman or two."

"Nothing of the sort, Count," interposed Hammerton, hurriedly. "You expose a card-sharper. Society is your debtor."

"My conscience, sir. The degradation of lending myself to such a fraud. Is that not matter for compensation?" replied Patroceni.

"Oh! that's your game, is it?" rejoined Hammerton, roughly. "Never mind your conscience and feelings. Name your price."

"A question of figures," said the Count, calmly, and as he spoke he checked the items off on his fingers. "Five per cent. on thirty thousand pounds down—hum, that's 1,500*l.*; five per cent. again the week before the marriage, that's 1,500*l.* more, and a bill for a third 1,500*l.* at the end of six months; total, 4,500*l.* Dirt cheap for such obloquy as I must bear."

"Never mind the latter part of your story," rejoined Hammerton, brusquely. "We know each other a little too well for that. The price is too stiff, Count."

"Probably the other side would give more," rejoined Patroceni, as he flipped the ash off his cigarette. "Mr. Wheldrake would think five thousand little to clear his reputation, and win the girl he loves with her thirty thousand pounds. I daresay he would give ten. Don't be stupid, my dear

Hammerton. Robbery in West End clubs, with West End manners, is exactly the same thing as robbery without the polish, and, human nature being precisely the same in high and low, the spoilers are just as liable to quarrel over the plunder."

"Curse your moralizing!" rejoined the Captain, sullenly. "Say two thousand pounds the week before the marriage, and have done with it."

"You are too impatient, my friend, to be a good business man," remarked Patroceni, blandly; "but when I say I must have four thousand, at least, or change sides, you will understand it is advisable to give it."

"I see nothing of the kind. Brag is a great game, but I am an old hand at it. Two I will give you, and no more."

"I never argue about such bagatelles as a couple of thousand pounds," replied the Count, with all the air of a millionnaire, to whom such a sum was but as loose change. "If I don't get it one way I do another."

Hammerton made no immediate reply to Patroceni's last speech. It dawned upon him in good earnest now that he was in the hands of as rank a bandit as ever sprang from the tribes. The quiet relentless power of the Count's nature awed him. He felt that Shylock was demanding his pound of flesh, and realised his inability to cope with Shylock. Yet he possessed one argument which must prove irresistible, and Patroceni already had a suspicion of this. Hammerton could plead with perfect truth inability to comply with the first clause in his antagonist's bond. It was a suspicion of this that had caused Patroceni to lower his claim by 500*l*. He suspected his dear friend Hammerton might have considerable difficulty in finding that ready money for which he at first stipulated, and this had caused him to think that perhaps a thousand pounds was as much as could be wrung from him at present. As for the rest, it was all contingent upon his engagement with Maude

Eversley. Should Hammerton succeed in that venture he would experience but little difficulty in raising the two remaining sums. But Hammerton, although he was endeavouring to drive a hard bargain, was, of course, aware that, ere it could be concluded, the first clause must be cancelled, his finding a thousand pounds was simply a sheer impossibility.

"Absurd, Count!" he answered at last. "I will give you a thousand pounds down the week before I am married, and a bill for another thousand at three months. That's the most I can or will do!"

"And that is your final offer?" said the Count, as he rose and proceeded leisurely to draw on his gloves.

Hammerton nodded.

"I will give you a week to amend it, and then I go to the other side."

"No you won't, Count!" cried Hammerton, harshly. "I should think even you

would shrink from voluntarily proclaiming yourself such a consummate scoundrel!"

"Monsieur ——" exclaimed Patroceni, sharply.

"Pooh, Count, there is no need to mince matters between you and me. We may speak plainly to one another. You expose me and you place me in the precise position I have placed Wheldrake in if people believe you—but you will stand in the dock by my side. Either way you will ruin yourself, believed or not believed. It is possible people may take the word of a well-known London man before that of a foreigner of whom they know nothing. I should have thought a thousand pounds extra a dear price to pay for having such a scandal tacked to one's name."

"And yet," returned the impassible Patroceni, "that is precisely what you decline to pay to avert it."

Hammerton bit his lips with vexation to

find how his eloquence had been wasted. The quiet way in which, after listening to his long exposition of the case, the Count turned the tables upon him, was exasperating. He recognised that he was battling with an astuter brain and more inflexible will than his own.

Patroceni stood calmly awaiting his reply.

"There is this difference," rejoined Hammerton, after a little thought, "I shall have to find a thousand pounds. You have only to forego it."

"I congratulate you upon even seeing that far beyond your nose; but that, you see, happens to be your business. You pay attention while I state the case to you. I am a man not given to render services for nothing. For holding my tongue at Homburg and assisting you in this last little comedy—upon which, by-the-bye, I once more compliment you—I intend to be paid. This marriage may never come off, in which case I should receive nothing. Decidedly,

my friend, I do not mean to leave England without replenishing my purse."

Hammerton eyed the Count keenly.

"Then your estates are mere *chateaux en Espagne*," he remarked bitterly, at length.

"The first time you are in the neighbourhood of Naples I invite you to come and see me in the character of a country gentleman. I will give you a week to think of it, or, as we are speaking plainly, a week to raise the thousand pounds. For the present, adieu!" and with a polite bow Patroceni took his departure.

Hammerton threw himself back in his chair and became absorbed in thought. He had no compunction about what he had done; it had become such a necessity that he should marry money, and that speedily, that he was prepared to go any lengths to achieve his purpose; indeed he had already proved himself utterly devoid of scruple about the means by which he was to attain his end. He regretted deeply that he was

so much in Patroceni's power; but the more he thought of it the more convinced he was that he could not have successfully carried out his plot without the assistance of an adroit confederate. The presence of Maude had been unfortunate in some wise, as it had afforded her the opportunity of hearing her lover protest his innocence in person instead of by letter, as would otherwise have been the case. But then, on the other hand, his cousin stood convinced by the evidence of her own eyes that it was not he who had brought the accusation against Wheldrake —indeed he could argue plausibly enough that he had taken his part and done his best to disprove the shameful charge brought by Patroceni. What was he to do? As for raising the thousand pounds demanded by Patroceni, that was not worth thinking about, and yet the bare idea of exposure made him shudder. All at once a gleam of light flashed across him. If his friend the Count was so resolute to take ready money

home with him why did he hesitate to go at once to Wheldrake? It was obvious he could command better terms from him and be assured of a considerable sum of money at once, as Cyril was not likely to bargain much about the price of clearing his good name. Why then did a man, utterly unscrupulous as Patroceni had shown himself, not take his goods to the best market? It could be only for one reason. Let him say what he liked, the Count was no more desirous of an exposure than he was; and, if that was the case, well then he could well afford to stand by his terms and abide the issue. Hammerton had made up his mind. The week passed and he made no sign.

Now the Captain very much under-estimated the Count's abilities when he came to the conclusion that Patroceni could not denounce him without denouncing himself. To a man of the Count's calibre that was nothing. He knew of course that Hammerton was tampering with the cards at

Wrottsley, and looked on in an amused way at the Captain's clumsy manipulation, perfectly transparent to an adept like Patroceni. He was quite aware of Hammerton's method, and knew that it was essential that one of the servants should be his confederate. It did not take long for a shrewd man of the world like the Count to discover which. Ere he left Wrottsley Patroceni had possessed himself of the man's name and address, and knew where to lay his hands upon him at any time. The Count flattered himself that, should it suit him to sell his information to Wheldrake, it would be possible to keep himself very much in the background, and figure as a man only too anxious to repair a gross injustice that he had been guilty of.

It is a pretty game of brag between two as unprincipled men as ever preyed upon society, and that two human lives ran every chance of wrecking for the gratification of their rapacity troubled them not a whit.

Patroceni, clever as he was, happened to be the first to discover a flaw in his game. When, as the week drew near to a close, he found he heard nothing from Hammerton, he thought it high time to hunt out Wheldrake's address. There was not much trouble in discovering that. Five minutes' study of the Blue Book at the Harlequin told him it, and further inquiry at the address told him, to his dismay, that Wheldrake had gone abroad. That this was excessively awkward Patroceni could not but admit to himself in homely language, much in vogue with the money-lender of the metropolis, "It's impossible to do business with a gentleman you can't see." It is no use having a secret to sell when the one man to whom it is worth selling is not forthcoming. Patroceni knew from experience that proud, sensitive natures, crushed beneath such a disaster as had befallen Wheldrake, were wont to hurry to the Continent and bury themselves in obscure

travel. He realised the fact as soon as he called at his rooms and was told that their master had gone abroad and left no address. It might be many months, nay, years, before he again crossed Wheldrake's path, and consequently the Count came to the conclusion that he would do well to drive the best bargain he could with his esteemed friend Hammerton. "There would not be much difficulty about that," murmured the Count to himself, smiling, "but for one thing: my dear friend Hammerton is at present most lamentably destitute of money."

CHAPTER IX.

OSTRACISED.

After hurling his presentiment at the head of his adversary, Wheldrake went straight up to his room; he was fairly stunned by the blow that had befallen him. It was enough to crush most men. In all the pride and exultation of success in having won the hand of the girl he loved, with pulses still throbbing at the warm-hearted congratulations of his friends on his approaching happiness, he was suddenly stricken to the dust. A thunderbolt launched by the hand of the stranger had stricken him, and left him dishonoured and

disgraced. Already he realised his terrible position. A man of the world, he saw clearly what had happened to him. He knew that this scandal would not be confined to Wrottsley. There were far too many people aware of the shame cast upon him to admit of that. He knew well how such stories as his flew round the gossiping-halls of club-land. Yes, the story of his shame would be all over London before the week was out. He was innocent, but who would believe it? True, Glanfield had declared that he held him guiltless, but then Glanfield was a loyal and thorough friend. Could he himself have acquitted a man placed in his position? No; it meant ruin, and nothing else. One chance only remained to him. He knew that he was the victim of a conspiracy, and there was a possibility that some day the story of that conspiracy might come to light. One thing was clear, he must leave Wrottsley at once, and rising from his chair he rang the bell.

It had been a night of high revel at Wrottsley, and Mr. Jackson and the upper-crust of the servants' hall had by no means finished toasting the young couple. At the sound of his master's bell, Chisel sprang to his feet and hastened to answer the summons. An excellent servant was Chisel. No order whatever could have disturbed his serenity. He would have obeyed it rapidly, implicitly, and without questioning, but it would have been a great mistake to doubt Chisel's shrewdness on that account. If he said nothing, he probably knew more about his master's affairs than any man living, not excepting his lawyer. But the valet could not help opening his eyes a little as he received his master's orders.

"Put me out a shooting-suit, fill my cigar-case, and be ready to let me out in a quarter of an hour. I am going to walk across to Bottlesby and catch the night-mail, which comes through at four in the morning. Ten minutes to two," he continued, looking

at his watch; "I have plenty of time to do it. You will pack up my traps and follow by the first train in the morning."

"Very good, sir," replied Chisel; and proceeded without further remark to carry out his orders and assist his master in dressing.

After letting him out of the house, Chisel proceeded downstairs, and, though ordinarily silent about Wheldrake's affairs, thought there was no harm in mentioning that he, Chisel, was going away by the first train in the morning, upon which it transpired that the servant of Captain Hammerton had received similar orders, and that Count Patroceni had also desired to be called in time for that train.

Old Jackson opened his eyes to their fullest extent when he heard all these particulars. "Ah!" he said, "there's been games going on about that backrat business no end. If young gentlemen want a quiet hand of cards, well and good—there's 'all-

fours,' 'cribbage,' and 'whist,' games as takes a deal of playing, and over which it is possible to win or lose a deal of money. These young men have been a going it, as far as stakes are concerned; and mind what I tell you, it's ended in a row, a devil of a row. I don't know the rights of it, but there ain't thirteen nines in two packs of cards—" and here Mr. Jackson favoured the company with a vinous wink.

"Nobody could have possibly suggested that," said Mr. Chisel, quietly. "What a ripping hand of cards you do play, Mr. Jackson, we all know. That our masters are pretty ignorant on such matters we all know also, but heaven help their stupidity; they must know eight nines go to two packs."

"Perhaps so, and perhaps not," rejoined old Jackson, pursing up his lips with the air of a man who could say a good deal if he liked. "Anyway, there was some on 'em playing there who didn't understand how

many nines there were to a pack, I'll go bail."

"What do you mean, sir?" inquired Wheldrake's valet.

"Never mind, Mr. Chisel; never mind, sir. I know what I mean, sir. What is not to be tackled by young men like you is all as clear as a trout-stream in summer to a man of my experience."

"And your opinion, Mr. Jackson, is——?" inquired the adroit Chisel, keenly curious to get at the solution of the embroglio.

"That it's time to go to bed," replied Jackson, with that intense gravity that at times endues the quaffer of beakers; "especially for young men who've got to call their masters early." And, rising from his presidential chair, Mr. Jackson proceeded to light his candle, and warbling, with clumsy facetiousness, in a cracked falsetto, "If you're waking call me early; call me early, mother dear," the confidential butler betook himself to his couch.

Like many another wrongfully accused, Wheldrake shrunk from contact with his fellows; he shunned his friends and carefully avoided his clubs. He thought that every one he met must know the miserable story of that night at Wrottsley, and in some measure he was right; for, thanks to Hammerton's exertions, the tale had travelled fast and far. He brooded sullenly over the disgrace that had befallen him. He took a more morbid view of what he told himself was his wretched life every day. A strictly honourable man, the slur cast upon him attained larger proportions hour by hour. He was approaching that frame of mind which sees no solution of its troubles but the grave, and strong men at such times lay sacrilegious hands upon that life God has given them. "It's about over with me," he thought; "and, only I hold with the old Roman philosopher that the suicide is like the cowardly sentinel who abandons his post, I'd make an end of it before the sun

goes down. But no, I must face my doom, as better men have done before me. There's one chance, darkness may be turned into light. I cannot help thinking that, in spite of appearances, Hammerton was privy to Patroceni's infamous accusation. Let me think. Ah! I remember, I threw my note-case on the table, and left it there some ten minutes or so before we sat down to cards. It was possible to tamper with it, no doubt, though hazardous; but what motive could either of the men have in branding me a cardsharper. Surely for men addicted to play like themselves it was more to their interest that I should continue to test my luck than be ostracised from all play. Could they deem that marriage would make me give up all that sort of thing? Did marriage always interpose a bar to the gambler? Not a whit, if fiction or fact can be relied on. Far from having crippled myself, my luck has borne me through triumphantly so far. If I have been no source of profit to

these men, whom I met for the first time at Homburg, that surely must be the sole grudge they can have against me. But practised gamblers like Patroceni never complain when fortune goes against them. Moreover they always cling to the idea of taking their revenge, and that is not to be obtained from a man whom they have virtually disqualified from ever touching a card again."

He turned to his letters with a weary sigh, and the first he opened stabbed him like a knife. It was from the committee of one of his clubs, telling him of the disgraceful story in circulation, and calling upon him at once to deny it *in toto*, or at all events submit some explanation of the affair for their consideration, adding that they refused to credit it; yet, as custodians of the club's honour, they had no alternative but to ask him if there was any shadow of truth in the tale, and to request his version of the affair. It was but what he had pictured to

himself, and yet this was, so to speak, the first official notice he had received of being tabooed, the first solemn declaration that society had thrust him from among them. Very clear that England was no place for him for many a day. Where was he to go? Such a story as his would stick to a man all over the Continent. He must avoid all beaten tracks, and, above all, association with his fellows. Henceforth, his travel must be as isolated as that of the Hebrew wanderer, condemned to roam the earth for ever in expiation of the betrayal of his Master.

Well, this letter had to be replied to; it was of course but the forerunner of others of similar import, and what was he to say? Nothing? Affirm his innocence in the face of the clear proof of his guilt? Sir Jasper, a mere looker-on, who had welcomed him as a son-in-law but a few hours before, and was moreover an upright, honourable gentleman, held him guilty. Except Glanfield, where would he find another to believe in his inno-

cence? Once more he sighed wearily in the bitterness of his spirit as he realised all that Patroceni and Hammerton—for the more he brooded over it the more he associated the two—had brought upon him, and then he sat down to write the sole answer possible, that "on his honour he was innocent, and was unable to account for the cards found in his note-case." He felt it was the lamest of refutations to a serious charge ever penned, but he could not better it. Men always did, in defiance of all proof to the contrary, deny cheating at cards, and the negative was always received with contemptuous incredulity.

He was right: as the first bill about Christmas time heralds the avalanche, so was this notice. That Cyril Wheldrake's explanation of the terrible story tacked to his name had been eminently unsatisfactory to the Committee of the Blenheim flashed like electricity round club-land, and some two or three more of these institutions to

which Cyril was affiliated lost no time in exacting similar explanations. The result was that Wheldrake was requested to withdraw from the first-named, and that his other clubs would follow the example thus set them hardly admitted of a doubt. He determined to forestal them, and at once sent in his resignation to all such monachal institutions as bore his name on their books, accompanied by a vigorous protest of his innocence of the crime laid to his charge. That done there remained nothing for him but to conclude his preparations for leaving England and then depart.

He had seen none of his old associates since leaving Wrottsley. He did not know for certain, but could only conjecture, that his name and his shame were in all men's mouths. Two days more and he should be gone, when suddenly Chisel announced that Mr. Glanfield wished to see him, and, in answer to his master's morose "Not at

home," simply threw open the door and admitted that gentleman.

"My dear Cyril, how are you?" inquired Mr. Glanfield, as he shook hands, and without waiting for further welcome threw himself into an arm-chair.

Staunchly as Glanfield had taken his part, Wheldrake was not a little disconcerted at his appearance. He frowned angrily at Chisel, to whom his orders had been peremptory and precise on the subject of "Not at home to any one." But Chisel gazed vaguely in another direction. The valet was sincerely attached to his master. He had, as we know by this, a fairly accurate idea of what did take place that evening at Wrottsley. He was quite as sceptical as ever Mr. Glanfield could be of Wheldrake's guilt in the affair. One thing he did see, that his master was gnawing his heart out, and the man's common sense told him that it would be good for

Wheldrake to have a long talk with any friend he could thoroughly rely upon. This was the third time Glanfield had called; on the first occasion Chisel had implicitly adhered to his master's orders, on the second Wheldrake had really been out, but this time Chisel had unbosomed himself.

"I am told to say 'not at home,'" he replied in answer to Glanfield's inquiry; "but Mr. Wheldrake is upstairs, and in my opinion it is high time you or some other of his friends saw him, sir. It's no use my pretending I don't know there was a rumpus at Wrottsley. It isn't likely I shouldn't have heard of it, but this I do know, that it has knocked my master clean over. He wants some one, Mr. Glanfield, just to pull him together and put his head straight." Chisel was a man of the world, and prided himself on adapting his conversation to his auditor; to Glanfield he talked horse; to a bishop he would improvise some mongrel imitation of "Paley's Evidences." Glanfield

looked upon him as a sharp fellow with a considerable knowledge of racing. He knew nothing whatever about it. His master considered him the best valet in England, with a dash of Leporello about him. He was a man of immaculate virtue. Shrewd and quick-witted, Chisel, after the manner of his class, was up to a certain point an excellent servant; pass that, and like his brethren he had the makings of an intolerably bad master.

"I did not mean to see any one," replied Wheldrake, with a faint smile, "but I am glad to have the chance of saying good-bye to you. I leave England the day after to-morrow. Nay, I have no choice," he continued, in answer to a gesture of dissent on Glanfield's part; "England has already left me. The 'Blenheim' have requested me to resign; not a man of my acquaintance but would cut me in the streets, and I—I dare not resent it. One is not obliged to know cardsharpers."

"Don't talk like that, Cyril. I know well enough you would never bolt out of the course. How that accursed bit of juggling was managed at Wrottsley I don't quite know, but jugglery it was, I'll swear. We shall come at the truth of it some day, and find out why that smooth-tongued Count desired to ruin you. Now, old man, I want to talk seriously to you. To go abroad is, I think, just at present the best thing you can do. Once you are out of the way it is very probable Patroceni will show his hand, and I shall discover what object there was in forcing you to leave the country, for that must have been the object of the shameful combination against you. Can you recall to mind anything that happened at Homburg that might account for such a dastardly vengeance?"

"Nothing," rejoined Cyril. "Why the thing was done, I can't tell; but the how it was done I think I can account for. Just before Sir Jasper proposed my health and

Maude's I threw my note-case on the table. While I was replying, saying 'Good night,' and so on, there was an opportunity for tampering with the note-case, for introducing the cards that ruined me."

"That's the clue, Cyril; that's all I want!" cried Glanfield, quite startled out of his usual apathy. "That's what puzzled me, how did they do it? Now I see how it could be done, I have no doubt that was the way it was done. Never you fear, but I'll get at it at last. I've unravelled a robbery or two in my time that looked quite as incomprehensible to start with. The motive of robbery is usually money; in your case it would be either that or revenge. You say you have done nothing to call forth the latter, therefore it must be the former; though how they are to make money out of disgracing you at present beats me. But, remember, I shall watch them like a lynx. They can't make money out of this plant without my discovering it;

and, though it's quite possible they may be some months before they attempt to trade on their treachery, sooner or later they will try to realise. I shall get at it all then. In the meanwhile, trust me to watch over your interests, and don't lose faith in me if you chance to hear I'm on intimate terms with Hammerton and Patroceni. Good-bye, Cyril, and God bless you. Go abroad is my advice, and don't leave an address behind you, except with me."

"You are right!" rejoined Wheldrake. "I shall not even take Chisel with me to begin upon. Address, I can't even give you at present, but I will write to you at the Blenheim."

"Good-bye," rejoined Glanfield, and, with a mighty hand-grip, the two men parted, little thinking where the baccarat party were next to foregather, nor dreaming of the game at which they were destined to play.

CHAPTER X.

"WILL YOU BE OUR GUIDE?"

MRS. FULLERTON was right. Maude was thoroughly prostrated by the disaster that had overtaken her. The rapid rupture of an engagement just announced, and for such a cause, would be a bitter blow to any girl's pride, but, with her affections seriously involved besides, it was terrible. Like her lover, she also shrank from her friends and acquaintances. She could not bear the idea of being pointed at as "that Miss Eversley, who was engaged to the fellow who was found with the cards up his sleeve, don't you know." She firmly believed in Cyril's

innocence, but she had heard from his own lips that he despaired of proving it. She could see no gleam of light in the future. She was a proud girl, and had carried her head high, but now the sunny tresses were, to speak metaphorically, trailing in the dust. Even her father seemed to lose heart, and have no courage to hold up his head amongst his fellows, in face of the great misfortune that had come upon him.

Like wildfire spread the hideous scandal; and people, from the amiable motive of not intruding upon the Eversleys in their trouble, shunned Wrottsley as if the small-pox raged within its walls. Maude fancied, as it is given to mortals to do under such circumstances, that the very servants regarded her with pity: that the story was current through the house she, of course, knew only too well, and all this was gall and wormwood to a girl like Maude. Curiously enough, that card-table story acted on Sir Jasper and his daughter precisely as

it had done upon Cyril Wheldrake. Although not quite so quickly, like him they made up their minds to leave England for a while. Commiseration in one's grief, although balm to some natures, is as nitric acid poured into the gaping wound to others. Sir Jasper and Maude were of the kind that fly to the desert when stricken to the death, and suffer in silence rather than moan over the misery that has come to them. Others there are, no doubt, weak, foolish, uncontained natures, who find much relief in unbosoming themselves to every sympathetic stranger they come across. It may be hard upon the stranger, but it seems to afford them much consolation.

And so it came to pass, that, about the time Wheldrake set forth on his pilgrimage, the Eversleys, too, meditated foreign travel, with no more idea of to what parts than Cyril himself. In both cases it was the flying from great sorrow, and, despite the Horatian maxim, that black care sits ever

behind the horseman, it is something to escape from the friends who pity us.

If Patroceni was considerably taken aback at the discovery that Wheldrake had left the country, he was not such a fool as to suppose that Hammerton was not also aware of it. He made no effort to see him, but simply dropped him a note, in which, quietly pointing out that the week's grace agreed upon had elapsed, he begged leave to inform Captain Hammerton that, should his terms not be complied with in the course of the following week, he would trouble him—Captain Hammerton—no more, but endeavour to make other arrangements.

"A very guarded, ambiguous letter," muttered the Captain; "he knows no more where Wheldrake is than I do, and, even if he did, it's a very open question whether he would venture to sell him our secret. I think I had better not reply to this. Forget who the swell was who said, 'If you have any doubt about writing a letter, *don't!*'

Clever man, though; it saves trouble, and rather seems to suit this case, at all events," and so Captain Hammerton quietly ignored his friend's second application.

But Patroceni's next move not only somewhat astonished Captain Hammerton, but it further puzzled the astute Mr. Glanfield. Patroceni retired once more to the Continent.

"Has he gone in pursuit of Wheldrake?" muttered Fred Hammerton, when the news reached him. "Wheldrake, I know, has left no address; as far as I can make out, he has confided his moves to no one. Still, the foreign police are clever, and Patroceni, I fancy, thoroughly understands how to utilise their talents. To run down Wheldrake may take him some time; for Wheldrake to return and establish his innocence may take him some time longer. Every day, nay every hour, that a man leaves a charge like this hanging over his head makes the dissipating of it more difficult.

No, I will play my own hand without further regard to my confederate. Let him do his worst; if it is not done quickly I shall care very little for what he can allege against me. Let my uncle only stick to the intentions expressed in this letter and my game seems easy. 'Will I join them in a trip to the Continent and be their *cicerone*.' I should rather think I would! Free quarters, and a run on the Continent, exactly suits this child, with the beastly spring weather we are coming to. I can't afford to *really* hunt this year, so I'll just realise the two or three horses I have right off, and, if I don't bring Maude to book before we get back, why, then I'll say I never deserve another opening. I have only one thing to think of, what places will be most agreeable for me (for, of course, it's all one to them where they go). I certainly don't want to come across Patroceni, but even if we do he's bound to give us a wide berth after the Wrottsley business."

As for Glanfield, he was considerably puzzled at Patroceni's departure, and during his considerable experience of the seamy side of human nature Glanfield failed to recall any case in which such a fell accusation as that launched at Cyril Wheldrake had not either been based on a fact or actuated by a powerful motive. He had discarded fact as a thing past belief; there remained only the motive. What was it? Whatever his motive might be, how was it possible to compass it if Patroceni left England, and that the Count had left England Glanfield had clearly convinced himself. He was completely mystified; had he been less loyal to Cyril he must have yielded to the evidence of his senses, and concluded that Wheldrake, in a moment of madness, had set himself to coerce fortune. Well, you cannot keep your eye upon any one with whose whereabouts you are unacquainted. Mr. Glanfield, who had a great idea of himself in the character of the amateur detective,

acquiesced in circumstances, and waited patiently for what the next move might be in the adversary's game; but the weeks slipped by without a sign of Patroceni. The Wheldrake card-case, as it was termed, gradually faded from men's minds. The winter was passed and gone, and the beginning of the London season had come. One day Mr. Glanfield received a note from Mrs. Fullerton, informing him that the little house in Hans Place was once more tenanted by its mistress, and requiring him to call at his earliest convenience, as she had much to say to him. "Really matter of importance," wrote the widow. "I might even ask you to forego your favourite pursuit, and see whether it was not possible that Epsom and Ascot could be carried on without you."

"There it is," said Mr. Glanfield, as he finished reading the note. "That's just like a woman. The serious business of a man's life, if she wants to be taken to a

public entertainment, must be put upon one side. I know from former experience what Mrs. Fullerton calls matter of serious importance. Can't get a box for the Lyceum! Wants an escort to the Old Masters, or something of that sort. Bless you, if you only give 'em their heads," continued Mr. Glanfield, meditatively, "it's impossible to say what you won't find yourself entered for! Cat shows, poultry shows, the Lord knows what!"

But although Mr. Glanfield might grumble, he never dreamt of not attending to any behest either of Mrs. Fullerton's or of Maude's. He had known the widow before her marriage, and there had been, indeed, a slight flirtation between them in youth, which might possibly have blossomed into matrimony had Glanfield at that time possessed means to support a wife, but till his father's death he had been a man with no profession, and but such moderate income as that father chose to allow him. As for

Maude he had known her from a child. She had conferred upon him the brevet rank of uncle at an early period of their acquaintance, with all the privileges attached to the character, which included the providing her with a perpetuity of toys, sweetmeats, &c. and occasionally taking her to a pantomime.

Mr. Glanfield lost no time in attending to Mrs. Fullerton's summons, and was greeted on his appearance with much cordiality by the widow.

"This, really, is a matter of great importance that I wish to consult you about. Sit down there, don't fidget, and I will give you some tea in the course of a few minutes."

If there was one fault Mr. Glanfield could claim exemption from it was fidgeting. Nobody ever took the vicissitudes of daily life with more calmness than he did. He quietly established himself in an easy chair, and waited till it should please the fair Fullerton to unbosom herself.

"Mr. Glanfield," said the widow, after a slight pause, "Sir Jasper has made up his mind for a run abroad. This season London is not destined to be graced by our presence; but we are all neophytes at Continental travel, and I am deputed to ask you to do us a great favour. Will you be our guide, counsellor, and friend? We are willing to put ourselves entirely in your hands, go where you will, if we only can persuade you to take charge of us."

"Give me a moment or two to think, Mrs. Fullerton?" replied Glanfield, "and then, perhaps, you wouldn't object to my asking one or two questions."

"No, sir; taking charge of myself and Maude, I am sure, is a somewhat serious business," rejoined the widow, with a saucy toss of the head, "though no doubt there *are* men who would consider themselves equal to the responsibility."

"Do you suppose Maude still cares for Cyril Wheldrake?"

"I'm puzzled. I fairly own I'm puzzled. I did think that I could follow the twists and turns of a girl's mind. I'm sure I ought to, for I twisted and turned enough myself when I was a girl."

"Yes, *fillies* are apt to be uncertain," rejoined Glanfield, gravely. "You never can tell when they will try and when they won't."

"Mr. Glanfield," retorted the widow, sharply, "for about the thousandth time I must beg you to express yourself in intelligible language. *Filets* are in my mind associated with cookery."

"Beg pardon! What I mean to say is young women are difficult to understand. I can't tell, for instance, whether Miss Eversley is trying to forget Wheldrake or to remember him."

"Difficult to understand; not in the least, if you men were not so absorbed in your own ridiculous pursuits that you neglect the

most important and interesting study of a man's life—and that is woman, sir."

"Oh, I don't pretend to understand that sort of thing myself," replied Glanfield, slowly; "but it seems to me they save us the trouble of any profound study now-a-days."

"He knows more about us than I gave him credit for," said Mrs. Fullerton to herself. "I confess I am beaten, Mr. Glanfield," she continued, aloud. "Whether Maude has put Cyril Wheldrake away from her thoughts or no I cannot make up my mind."

"I should think she had," retorted Glanfield, a little bitterly. "I never saw a more decided revolution in the betting—any one can see Hammerton's first favourite now."

"Just what a man would think; but favourites don't always win, I've heard; at all events the apparent favourite doesn't always carry off the prize when a girl's

heart is in question," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, sharply.

"Perhaps not. Still, Wheldrake, innocent as I believe him, could hardly hope a girl would stand to him in such a struggle."

"He must be innocent about the working of a girl's heart as yet, if he thought she would do anything else," said the widow, with a derisive laugh. "The only question was,—did she love him? I know she did, I think she does."

"But an accusation such as was brought against Wheldrake ——"

"Is nothing in the eyes of a woman who likes him. Cheat at cards! Why, we all do if we can. We don't like being found out, but we don't mind doing it."

"We've rather got out of the course, haven't we?" observed Glanfield, mildly, perfectly aware that the discussion of card-table moralities with a lady was equivalent to the discussion of the law of property with an Irish Member of Parliament.

"Got out of the course," exclaimed the widow with the prettiest affectation of utter bewilderment.

"I mean, rather strayed from the subject," replied Glanfield, hurriedly.

"Oh dear, Mr. Glanfield, why don't you do yourself justice. Show us the classical acquirements I know you possess, instead of deluging us with the Racing Calendar."

"Classical acquirements don't win Derbys or anything else in these days. When a fellow quotes 'Horace' in the House no other fellow understands him. Pity a young woman like you, Mrs. Fullerton, don't go with the times ——"

"Well," retorted the widow, furiously, "my dresses come from Worth's, and if that is not going with the times I should very much like to know what is, and where it can be done cheaper."

"Beg pardon! We're all wrong again. There's not a woman in London looks better than you when you're stripped. No, I

don't mean that," exclaimed Mr. Glanfield, looking much confused, and as he half rose stepping into his hat. "I mean when you've got your clothes off. No, I don't mean that," almost shrieked Mr. Glanfield, as in a tremor of agitation he reseated himself and endeavoured to do what never was done yet, straighten that lacerated hat out again. "No, no; I mean when you've thrown off your wraps, opera cloak, and all that ——"

"It was as well you did explain, sir," replied the widow, nearly suffocated with laughter. "Why on earth don't you talk ordinary English like any one else."

"Shouldn't be much like any one else if I did," replied Glanfield, sententiously; "that is, any one in good society. I do my best, Mrs. Fullerton, but old Johnson wouldn't himself be in it in these days."

"Never mind old Johnson. Nobody ever reads *him*. But you do think I know how to dress," said the widow, coquettishly.

"Rather, and I flatter myself I'm a judge of when you're properly groomed and pitched out ——"

"Groomed and pitched out! what does the man mean? Mr. Glanfield, you are incorrigible."

"No, I'm not. I apologise. So very odd you don't understand modern English."

"Very odd! Pray go on, sir," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, petulantly.

"Of course I know you are about the best dressed, best turned-out woman of my acquaintance," said Glanfield, quietly.

"And the general effect is ——"

"Almost depressing," replied Glanfield, drily; "you see you're so dreadful lovely I am almost afraid to speak to you."

"Pshaw, what nonsense you talk! As if a woman wouldn't always listen to a man who expressed admiration for herself. But can we depend on you for this tour?"

"Most certainly," replied Glanfield, with a dubious glance at his hat. "You and

Maude can always do that," he continued, as he feebly endeavoured to rectify the little accident to his headgear. "In the meantime I'll say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Glanfield, and if I might suggest anything it would be a visit to your hatter's, as your unaided exertions will never make a hat of that article again," and with a ripple of laughter which sent Glanfield hurriedly out of the room the widow extended her hand in a vain attempt to say good-bye to her discomfited knight.

CHAPTER XI.

JACKSON HAS HIS SUSPICIONS.

"WELL," exclaimed Mr. Glanfield, when he found himself in the street, "here's a pretty go; I haven't missed seeing the Derby since I was eighteen, and here's Mrs. Fullerton goes and upsets the continuity of the calendar. What put it into her head that I am a competent courier? I don't understand foreign money and know generally nothing about foreign travel; and, hang it, I've got a pony on 'Queen of the May,' and shan't know before midsummer whether she's won the Oaks, I suppose."

Immersed in such reflections, Glanfield

leisurely made his way to the Blenheim, where he was at once hailed by a little knot, who were evidently discussing some subject with considerable animation in the bay window of the morning room.

"Here's Jim Glanfield can tell us all about it," exclaimed one of them. "What's the truth about this business of Wheldrake's. You were there, Jim, and know what really took place. I'm told he's written to the Committee and taken his name off the books, but, beyond stating that he is innocent, vouchsafes no explanation. He's one of the straightest fellows I know, and I'd as soon suspect him of playing tricks with the pasteboard as any of the lot here of nailing my watch."

"And, on my honour, I believe you'd be right, Lacy. Wheldrake's case for the present is hopeless, but I hold him thoroughly innocent. Who put the cards into his notecase I can't venture to guess, but they weren't put there by him, I'll swear. How-

ever, don't let us talk about it; it's a good fellow ruined from sheer treachery I'm convinced, and the day will come when we shall get at it."

But this little knot in the bow window were by no means to be pacified by that brief statement. Wheldrake was a very popular man, and his companions, like Lacy, were loath to believe him guilty of such a crime. They insisted on cross-examining Glanfield, and gradually drew from him the whole history of that luckless evening's baccarat, but they one and all shook their heads at his narration. Anxious as they all were to find some probable explanation, they could not but admit that when extra cards are found in a man's note-case the presumption is that he placed them there in default of any evidence to the contrary. As to Glanfield, having once stated his positive conviction of his friend's innocence, he abstained from further comment. He answered briefly, but willingly, every question that

was put to him, and was evidently relieved when his interlocutors ceased their inquiries. From that time men shook their heads over Cyril Wheldrake; it was very sad, but the evidence was very conclusive. Patroceni most of them had never heard of, but Hammerton was well-known, and that he had introduced the Count at Wrottsley was deemed sufficient proof of Patroceni's position in his own country. It was not likely that Fred Hammerton would introduce a man of doubtful antecedents into his uncle's house, and the old insular prejudice existent at the beginning of the century against the foreigner has long disappeared.

There was no one in London perhaps more thoroughly nonplussed by Wheldrake's disappearance, for he had carried out the intention he announced to Glanfield, than Mr. Chisel. A night or two after Jim's visit Wheldrake informed that worthy of his intention of leaving for the Continent by the morning train; that he, Chisel, would be left

behind, but was to hold himself in readiness to join his master on the receipt of orders to that effect. The valet, who was not only sincerely attached to Wheldrake, but who foresaw a somewhat dullish time before him in London, pleaded earnestly that he might also go; but his master was peremptory on the point, telling him that, if anything he (Chisel) deemed of importance should transpire, he was at once to communicate it to Mr. Glanfield. Cyril little foresaw when he took his ticket for the Continent that Mr. Glanfield would speedily follow in his footsteps, and that he was leaving his interests in the hands of a man not destined to be in the way to attend to them,—an unfortunate accident, as he was destined eventually to find out.

Now the man who really had the clue to the mystery, and who, if he had told what he knew, could have given Glanfield the key to it all, was old Jackson; but old Jackson was heavy of thought, and, asto-

nished as he had been by that discovery of supplementary nines on the table, had as yet never been able to put his puzzle together. To any man accustomed to play cards it would have been obvious at *once* that, whoever the introducer of those extra cards might be, he must have had a confederate amongst the servants. Had that commonplace truth dawned upon Jackson's mind what could have been simpler for him than to ascertain which servant it was who habitually sorted the cards and restored them to their place in the box? Whoever that man was he must have invariably taken away those extra nines, thereby restoring the packs to their natural condition, but all this never occurred to the old man. That those extra nines weren't right he was quite aware of; that there was something wrong going on at the evening's card-playing he was also, as he told Sir Jasper, perfectly certain, but it was quite beyond him to put two and two together this way. What puzzled him was

child's play to Patroceni, and to discover Hammerton's confederate the work of an hour or two. Indeed he pretty well knew who the suborned footman was before the explosion took place.

But to Jackson this was by no means so clear. The old man was anxious to do what was right. He knew, as all the house did, that there had been a row over the card-playing; but as to the exact particulars of that fracas they were all in ignorance. He was devoted to Miss Maude, as indeed were all the servants at Wrottsley. He thought very highly of Wheldrake, and was delighted at the idea that Cyril was to marry his young mistress; but then again for years he and Sir Joseph's retainers had been accustomed to hold "the Captain" in great veneration. He wasn't, perhaps, quite such a nailer with a gun as Parson Pilcher, and it might be when it came to a question of racing that Mr. Glanfield knew a bit more than he did; but still, take it all round, in the vernacular

of the stable-yard, "the Captain was a clipper." Free-handed with his sovereigns, Fred Hammerton always was—impecunious unfortunates of this kind always are; and Hammerton quite justified their opinions insomuch that he was a fairly good all-round sportsman. As for his gambling, Wrottsley knew little of that, but that the young gentleman should like what they termed "just a flutter" with the cards was a thing the old servants had been brought up to expect. Such a case as the present had certainly never occurred there before in their experience, but suspect the Captain, either Mr. Wheldrake or Mr. Glanfield, they couldn't, and, therefore, naturally arrived at the conclusion that "that there furriner was at the bottom of it." The real delinquent in the meantime held his tongue; he lived in fear and trembling. He had been well paid for what he had done, and differed from his fellow-servants only in this—instead of thinking that that confounded foreigner

was the offender, he lived in grievous apprehension that Patroceni had *got* to the bottom of it. Still, the more the butler pondered over those nines the more it gradually dawned on him that it was probably not the only occasion on which they had been used so freely. Of a slow-thinking, bucolic nature, it was long before he thoroughly mastered this idea, and even then it wasn't until talking it over,—whilst consuming a pint of mulled port with Mrs. Smithson, the housekeeper,—that an observation of that lady's drew attention to the circumstance.

"Mr. Jackson," said she, patting out the brown silk dress in which she was wont to array herself when she had ascertained that the dinner was properly dished up, "if that superfluity of nines was customary, who was it put them packs straight in the morning?"

"Mrs. Smithson," rejoined the butler, "a woman of genius you always was, I know; but by the Lord, marm, you're a clinker,

that's what you are. You've about hit it, you have." And old Jackson slapped his hand on his thigh, as his manner was when he considered he had made a point.

"I don't think I am quite a fool," said Mrs. Smithson, both beaming and bridling at her companion's encomiums; "but which of the young good-for-nothings (and the lamp-chimneys they break and the glass-cloths they use no one can imagine) it was that used to put these cards right must be matter easy to ascertain."

"Right you are, marm. Dead on a fact, as Parson Pilcher is on a rabbit. I'll get hold of it before this time to-morrow, and as you say, Mrs. Smithson—or was about to say (just one more glass, marm, before we says good-night)—there's a young man in this house who that there foreign Count has utterly corrupted, and drag the truth out of him we must. They are apt to be uppish, these juniors; but I think, my dear marm, we know two people who can keep 'em in their

places," and with a leer, in which the strength of the port wine negus was visibly obvious, Mr. Jackson wished the housekeeper a good night more affectionately than was called for.

Viewed through the general atmosphere of the wine-cup things are apt to seem quite easy of accomplishment which the quiet consideration of morning regards in a very different light, and old Jackson was not quite the man to investigate a delicate question. He was imbued with an overwhelming sense of his own sagacity, and though anxious to expose the "furriner," and, to use his own expression, put the saddle on the right horse, he would have scouted the idea of taking any one's advice upon what appeared to him now such a very simple matter. It was just that apparent simplicity that constituted the difficulty. He ascertained without any trouble the next morning who it was that habitually resorted the packs and restored them

to the card-box; but William, the footman in question, was quite positive as to never having found a card too many while doing so. He was very clear about it indeed, declaring the two packs sorted out perfectly even every morning, and that it was a sheer impossibility that a single extra card could have escaped his notice. It was now that Jackson showed his utter imcompetence to fulfil the *rôle* of detective. Thoroughly convinced that he had found the culprit, he threatened him with all sorts of penalties and denunciation unless he made a clean breast of it, and at once confessed his collusion with Count Patroceni. It was in vain the unfortunate William protested his innocence and adhered to his statement. Jackson, a little after the pattern of our own police, having made up his mind that this was the guilty person, refused to entertain any other view of the affair, and shut his eyes to what would have occurred at once to Glanfield and did occur to Patroceni,

namely, that William was not the first person who ran over those cards in the morning. Hammerton might not be an artist of the first power, but he was not quite such a bungler as to select for his confederate the man upon whom, in case of a disturbance, suspicion must infalliby fall.

Steadily persisting in his suspicion, Jackson drove the unfortunate William to the verge of frenzy. What he had done was unknown to the household, but that he was the committer of some dark but undiscovered crime was a fixed fact with them all, from Mrs. Smithson and the butler down to the scullerymaid, and that odd boy who usually does most of all his fellow-servants' work. The luckless footman went about with a criminal taint surrounding him. Jackson wagged his head in portentous silence when questioned, as over an impenitent thief. In his own class the hapless William was as distinctly tabooed as Cyril Whel-

drake, and when, at the expiration of a scarcely endurable fortnight, he gave warning, Mr. Jackson predicted a speedy accession to the denizens of Portland Prison, and trusted that might be the worst that should come to William in this world, winding up with objurgations upon the enormity of not making such reparation for offending "as owning up to your fault like a man."

The family had by this left Wrottsley, and Sir Jasper was staying in town till such time as all their preparations for a lengthened tour abroad should be completed; but Mrs. Fullerton was not the woman to depart on any expedition of the kind without a due assortment of dresses, and those having experiences of a dressmaker's fulfilment of her obligations during the London season will know there is much uncertainty about the concluding of such arrangements. So Sir Jasper and his belongings still dawdled on in London, and Maude had to play that

bitter part which has been played so many times by maidens whose love-tale has gone askew, namely, facing society with unblenching brow and the sunny smile of a girl to whom life is without a care.

Ah, me! if we could but see behind the well-bred, easy air that it is conventional to wear amongst those who are deemed the spoiled children of fashion I think we should often own that the game was by no means worth the candle. That girl in such bewitching costume, glorious eyes, and lovely complexion, is haunted by the threats of a termagant milliner, who vows, unless she has unimpeachable testimony of her client's betrothal, she will have either her money or proceed to extremities at the end of the season. That man with a cigar in his mouth and a gardenia in his button-hole, who has raised his hat a score of times between Hyde Park Corner and Albert Gate, is gravely wondering how much longer it will be be-

fore that menaced execution will be levied on his goods and chattels in that pretty little house in May Fair by the inexorable Queen's taxes, whose demands he sees no possibility of satisfying. Yes, life is not all so rosy when we are allowed a peep behind the scenes, and many of those that seem objects of envy have but a gruesome time, did we but know it.

Hammerton strictly carried out the tactics he had confided to Patroceni. He was unwearied in his attendance on his cousin, and, solicited or not, Maude rarely appeared in public without him as her cavalier. The girl thought nothing of it. She had been used to him all her life, and Fred Hammerton was far too astute a manœuvrer to make love to her at present. He treated her always with a marked deference calculated to convey to lookers-on that he was a lover without giving the girl herself the slightest pretext for regarding him in that light. Nobody understood better than Hammerton

the compromising of a girl in this wise, and so cleverly was it done that even Jim Glanfield began to question whether Maude had not, despite Mrs. Fullerton's dictum, put Cyril thoroughly away from her thoughts.

CHAPTER XII.

STARTING FOR THE CONTINENT.

JACKSON was a man of slow conception, and the incubation of his ideas was no speedy matter. He was gradually coming to the conclusion that it was his duty to write to Sir Jasper and tell him of the discovery he had made, when he was startled by the discovery that the supposed culprit's month's notice was up, and by his taking a summary departure. This once more upset the old butler, leaving him another knotty point to decide—namely, whether it was worth his while to communicate his discovery now that the delinquent had disappeared, and

the result of a prolonged conference with Mrs. Smithson was that he had better keep his suspicions to himself. Mrs. Smithson, who was a tolerably shrewd woman, pointed out that Miss Maude's engagement was completely broken off, and she rather doubted their ability to put things straight again; and, at all events, it was very difficult for them to tell the whole story in a letter, and that completely settled the case. Mr. Jackson had a great idea of his own eloquence, but no great confidence in his epistolary powers, and so the thing was postponed till such time as he should see Sir Jasper again.

But it soon became evident to Mrs. Fullerton that Maude, although she made no sign of moping, and went out everywhere, was, nevertheless, suffering a great deal. All the spring seemed to have gone out of the girl's life. Garden-party or dance, play or cricket-match, seemed to interest her no longer. She, who hitherto

had enjoyed life so keenly, seemed now to have lost all zest for it, and though she bore it bravely her aunt could see that what she specially shrank from was the meeting of so many people to whom the whole story was known, and who inadvertently alluded to it within her hearing. The scandal about Wheldrake, like most such stories in the London world, had been but a nine days' wonder, but it was still fresh in men's minds; and the appearance of that pretty Miss Eversley so constantly recalled it to people's recollection, and provoked comment thereon, which, though not intended for Maude's hearing, seldom escaped her ears. Mrs. Fullerton was both very fond and proud of her niece, and rapidly came to the conclusion that change of scene, or rather of people, was what Maude required—that the girl would be better amongst strangers, where she was not continually reminded of her lover's shame; and, having made up her mind on that point, hastened the ar-

rangements for departure as much as recalcitrant dressmakers would permit. No sooner did Hammerton discover that the hour of departure drew near than he took speedy steps to enrol himself of the party. It would have answered his purpose infinitely better if Maude had remained in town through the whole of the season, in order that he might appear continually by her side. He was not going to neglect his opportunity. No one knew better than he that many a girl's hand, though not her heart, is won on the rebound. It might not be of any use to speak to Maude yet, but he did not intend to leave the field open to any one else. He had run that risk already, and hardly liked to think what it had cost him to oust that successful rival. Patroceni was, he knew, a very dangerous and skilful man to have arrayed against him, and more especially so when he held one in his power; and Hammerton knew the Count too well to suppose that, though he had disappeared

for the time, he had by any means relinquished his intention of sharing the spoils. Well, there was no question about dividing the plunder at present, though that, when there was, Patroceni would re-appear upon the scene, he felt morally certain. Indeed, Hammerton would probably have acceded to the Count's original request had it been in his power to procure the first instalment of the sum demanded.

Calling one day at Mrs. Fullerton's, Mr. Glanfield, on being ushered into the drawing-room, found it occupied solely by Maude. He had never seen the girl alone since the *fracas* at Wrottsley, and, as may be supposed, the incident of that night had never been alluded to between them.

"Quick, Mr. Glanfield," she exclaimed, as she motioned him to a chair, "tell me at once what you have heard?"

"Do you mean about our departure?"

"No, about Cyril. Tell me everything. I know nothing whatever about him since

that terrible night. They never mention his name to me. What has he done? What has become of him? If I catch the echo of his name in society, voices are immediately stilled in my presence; but even from the little I have gathered I know that he is cast out from amongst us."

"I fancy," replied Glanfield, "I was about the last person Cyril saw before he left London. He was utterly crushed by the disgrace that had fallen upon him. You have heard the truth; he is socially ruined. He told me he was going abroad, and promised to write; but as yet I have not heard from him. Is it impertinent to ask if you still take an interest in him?"

"That I should still take an interest in a man who stood to me in the relation that Cyril once did is only natural. That I should feel anything more," continued the girl, "is scarcely likely. He has never condescended to let me hear from or of him since that night. I said I believed in him in spite of

appearances. He apparently believed neither in himself nor me."

"My dear Miss Eversley, I assure you ——" but at this juncture the door opened, and Mrs. Fullerton entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Glanfield," she exclaimed, gaily. "I really do believe I shall be ready to start next week. I arranged it all with Jasper yesterday. We are to have a good long lounging tour all over the Continent—Germany, Switzerland, and Italy. We shall not get back before the beginning of September."

"Ah!" said Glanfield anxiously, "the beginning! Now do let us be sure that it *is* the beginning."

"Why dear me," retorted Mrs. Fullerton, "surely the partridges can wait for another week or two."

"Oh, aunt," said Maude, smiling, "I should have thought you would have understood Mr. Glanfield better."

"Partridges!" exclaimed that gentleman contemptuously; "yes, they will wait fast enough; but the St. Leger you see is a fixed feast, and ——"

"You really are irreclaimable," said Mrs. Fullerton. "You never can for an instant put your favourite pursuit on one side."

"It is something to have a pursuit in these days, and not be one of the many who have got nothing to do, be it work or pleasure."

"I suppose you will be ready to accompany us?"

"Always ready at twenty-four hours' notice to go anywhere," rejoined Glanfield. "Have you arranged matters with Captain Hammerton, for I'm told he is coming too."

"Oh yes, he is only awaiting orders. I am looking forward to Italy so much; I have never been there."

Maude gave a slight shiver. She could

but recollect how Cyril had talked of Italy for their bridal tour. The name also attracted Glanfield's attention, and it occurred to him as just possible that they might come across Patroceni in those parts, and in that case learn more of his antecedents than any one seemed to know at present; and then, while Mrs. Fullerton was describing to Maude a travelling costume destined to desolate all hearts, Glanfield recalled Wheldrake's presentiment, and wondered if he should be present at the next game between them, should it ever be played. No doubt the Continent was wide, but the beaten tracks of travel are pretty much the same in all countries, and he did not suppose their party would deviate from them. He then rose and bade the two ladies good-bye.

Mrs. Fullerton's spirits were infectious; and, what with her aunt's vivacity and the idea of leaving town, Maude felt more like her old self than she had done since the rupture of her engagement. It was very pos-

sible that there was some lurking hope in her breast that in the course of their wanderings they might come across Cyril Wheldrake; and, although she spoke frankly enough to Jim Glanfield of her resentment at his silence, she knew at the bottom of her heart that she was true as ever to her love.

When Glanfield arrived at his rooms he was not a little astonished to find Wheldrake's servant waiting to see him.

"Come in, Chisel," he exclaimed. "What is it? I suppose you have some news of your master?"

"No, sir; indeed I was in hopes to hear something of him from you. Mrs. Fullerton's maid, you may have noticed her, very clean about the ancles, sir. Well, we got rather friendly down at Wrottsley. She corresponds with some of the servants down there, and she tells me there's been a bit of a kick-up at the hall."

"Why, Sir Jasper's in town. Some row

amongst the servants, I suppose. Really this doesn't concern me."

"No, sir, but she says that affair of my master's was at the bottom of the whole business."

"How the devil can that be; unless," he added thoughtfully, "there were two sides in the servants' hall, as there were in the drawing-room? Do you mean to say you know no more about it than this?"

"I can tell you no more than that, sir," replied Chisel.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Glanfield. "It's no use coming to me with the account of every idle quarrel that occurs in the servants' hall. Just as you and I hold your master innocent, so no doubt there was a diversity of opinion both above and below stairs. That something of the story would leak out there could be no doubt. It has been as plainly told in the papers as editors thought safe, though, of course, the real facts of the case are only known to those

present. Of course you know why your master has gone abroad ? "

" Yes, sir ; there was a rumour of something up even before I left. Don't you think it advisable that I should go down to Wrottsley and see what I can make of it ? "

" No," rejoined Glanfield, sharply, " most decidedly not."

Jim had great belief in himself as an amateur detective, and knew there was nothing so fatal as calling in incompetent subordinates who usually foil the scent. He felt sure that they would do little good until Patroceni showed his hand. As to this squabble in the servants' hall at Wrottsley they could always get at that if there should happen to be anything worth knowing in it.

" Well, sir, you know best," replied Chisel, ruefully ; " but you're going away in a few days, and then where am I to look for orders ? "

" To your master of course ; he told you when he left that you were to wait here and

look after things till he sent for you. That's clear enough; when he wants you no doubt you'll hear," retorted Glanfield, curtly.

"Then I suppose there's nothing for me to do at all, sir," responded Chisel, in crushed tones.

"Nothing but what I tell you. Wait for orders;" and with a nod of his head Glanfield dismissed the valet.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHELDRAKE FALLS INTO STRANGE COMPANY.

The London season, with all its glitter and gossip, is a thing of the past. The Eversleys and their party have now been abroad for some time, and, except Sir Jasper's bankers, no one seems to know their exact whereabouts. Of Wheldrake nothing has been heard since his departure, and Mr. Chisel is still awaiting those orders which seem destined never to come. Seated at the door of one of the small pavilions that stand within the grounds of the Villa Reale is Count Patroceni, enjoying a cigarette and looking lazily over the Bay of Naples. On the table

by his side stands his coffee: as he continues to smoke with half-closed eyes a more indolent-looking gentleman could scarcely have been found.

"Ah," he said, with a smile, to himself, "people don't mean much as a rule by general invitations, but I hear Sir Jasper Eversley and his family are wandering about this part of the world, and it won't be my fault if he does not pay me a visit. It is very curious that I should have been unable to trace Wheldrake. I have good friends among the police, and better means of procuring information than most people, yet I have not been able to hear any thing of him since he left London. It is odd—it is worse, it is disappointing; for not only have I important business to transact with him, but I also have that little account to settle with my friend Captain Hammerton: such ingratitude I can bear from no one. Ho, Matteo!" And the Count rapped his cane on the table.

The swarthy proprietor of the pavilion rapidly emerged from the building, in answer to the Count's summons.

"Ah, Eccellenza!" he exclaimed, in a manner almost servile, "it is like the refreshing dew to see you once again. May your devoted follower trust that your Excellency is in good health? What can I do for you?"

"Have you any news for me? Any one worth knowing, for instance, coming my way?"

"Ah, yes, signor," replied Matteo, "there are a rich English lord and his party who have just arrived, who talk about making an excursion in your direction, whom you and I would gladly welcome."

"Ha! when did they arrive?" inquired the Count.

"They only arrived in Naples two days ago; but don't speak too loud, Eccellenza, or you will wake the Englishman, who is sleeping inside there."

"An Englishman? What Englishman?" asked Patroceni, lowering his voice; "does he belong to the English lord's party?"

"No, signor," replied Matteo, softly, "he is one of these travelling English; he arrived here some two hours ago, on foot, complained of being tired, asked for a room, and has gone to sleep."

"I have been too much in that country lately," muttered the Count, "to risk meeting a possible acquaintance—at all events, just now. You must find out when they start. Matteo," he continued, "I will send up Giovanni to hear your news, and also to keep an eye on this stranger, though I don't suppose he is of much consequence. I will let myself out through the back of the house; I don't want as yet to encounter any of this English party."

"Ah, he is a wonderful man, his Excellency!" ejaculated Matteo, drawing a deep breath expressive of his deep admiration for the Count. "These English! It is pic-

turesque, no doubt, dining with the signor up yonder," and he jerked his fingers significantly in the direction of Monte St. Angelo, "but it is expensive; none of my profession dare send in bills like his."

A few minutes more and the Englishman of whom Matteo had spoken came out of the pavilion; and had Patroceni delayed his departure those few minutes he would have found himself face to face with the very man he was so anxious to see.

"I hope the signor is refreshed by his siesta," said Matteo, bowing, as he proceeded to clear away the *débris* of the Count's coffee.

"Thank you, my good host," said Wheldrake, as he threw himself into a seat. "Get me a bottle of wine, and get me something to eat. It is hard," he muttered to himself, as Matteo disappeared to fulfil the order, "to be looked askance at by all my friends, socially blasted, and from no fault of my own. Men wreck their lives from their own

vice and folly; but I am the innocent victim of the foulest treachery! I wonder what has become of them all! Can that paragraph be true that I saw in one of the society papers, that she is about to marry Hammerton? Do women ever really love us? A few months back, and I should have laughed at the man who questioned it. In my hour of agony, when this terrible charge was first, to all appearance, proved against me, Maude refused to believe it. Swore she would never doubt me, come what might; and now that paper says she is about to marry Hammerton. I have heard men say women never sorrow about us long, but I did think Maude would have felt my ruin a little longer. No, Maude, my dearest, I may by this have faded from your mind. The memory of our former love may only recur to you like a happy dream, of which the awakening was shame and disgrace; but I thank God still for having given me that dream."

"There, signor," said Matteo, as he emerged from the house with the required refreshment; "that is such a bottle of wine, though I say it, as you'll scarcely get for twenty miles round. The signor seems sad; try it, my lord, it will raise your spirits."

"Excellent!" rejoined Weldrake. "Fill a glass for yourself; such stuff as this is as good for the host as for the guest, a thing not always the case amongst your fraternity, my friend."

"Ah, eccellenza, we had better not say too much on that point," said Matteo, smacking his lips. "Pshaw!" he continued, with a shrug of his shoulders, "there is much wine made that it is better to sell than to drink."

"A man needn't travel far to find that out," rejoined Wheldrake. "By the way, have you ever heard of a Count Patroceni? I'm told he lives near Naples."

"The Count, signor, the Count," said

Matteo with evident astonishment. "Count Patroceni, a most amiable and respected nobleman in these parts. Yes, my lord, much loved and respected."

"I can imagine that," rejoined Wheldrake, slowly. "But ah! whom have we here?"

"A most respectable farmer of these parts," replied Matteo.

"Ah! good day, Giovanni. How have the markets been of late?" he continued patronisingly.

If the new-comer warranted Matteo's encomiums his looks belied him, for he was about as truculent-looking a ruffian as is often come across.

"A little overdone with respectability this community," muttered Wheldrake. "The Count's much respected and my friend here is a most respectable farmer. There's generally some d——d villainy cloaked beneath so much respectability."

"Markets are dull," replied Giovanni, as

he seated himself at Wheldrake's table, "but his excellency tells me they are about to mend. Get me some wine, my good Matteo."

"You make yourself at home, friend," remarked Wheldrake, staring at his uninvited companion.

"Most people do in an inn," retorted the farmer, as he raised his glass to his lips.

"One of the Count's tenants, signor," interposed Matteo, nervously. "A most respectable man, I assure you."

"Ah! you hold property under Count Patroceni?" said Wheldrake.

"Yes," replied Giovanni, laughing, "we all do, and as much as we can lay our hands on," and as he finished he again filled his glass.

"Yes, eccellenza," again interposed Matteo, hurriedly, "the Count is such an excellent landlord his tenants are always anxious to hold ——"

"More and more property," interrupted

Giovanni with a boisterous guffaw. "*Capperi!* his excellency keeps a tight grasp, and takes care our share is never so large," and as he finished speaking he poured himself out another bumper.

"Your share?" exclaimed Wheldrake.

"He means, signor," said Matteo, making signs to Giovanni to leave the bottle alone, "that the Count's rents are a per-centage system of the harvests gathered."

"Yes, signor," said Giovanni, sulkily, "that's what I mean. These flasks of yours run very small, friend Matteo," and as he spoke he turned up his empty bottle in disgust.

"You are right," said Wheldrake, "try some of mine," and he pushed his wine across. "Matteo, my good fellow, see if you can find us another like this in the cellar."

Matteo hesitated for a moment and evidently regarded Giovanni with much mis-

giving; at last, with the brief observation, "Certainly, signor," he disappeared into the house.

"That's good stuff," said Giovanni; "it's a better brand than the vintage I've been drinking."

"Your landlord owns a large estate then?" said Wheldrake, inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Giovanni, grinning; "he levies taxes for many miles round," and with a deep sigh of regret the unprepossessing farmer finished Wheldrake's flask.

"Levies taxes?"

"Yes, my little fellow, we take toll of most people in these parts."

At this moment Matteo emerged hurriedly from the pavilion.

"He means the Count has the right of *octroi* in these parts, signor," he said as he put the fresh bottle on the table.

"I suppose there are a good many of you?" asked Wheldrake.

"Oh about a score of as stout fellows as ever you saw," replied Giovanni, as he helped himself to the wine.

"And can I see this popular landlord of yours? I presume he lives no great distance from here ——"

"His excellency lives here, there, and everywhere," replied Giovanni with a drunken laugh, "but he has a sweet little place near here, where, when at home, he is delighted to receive strangers. Like many men popular by reputation, his popularity rather disappears when seen and tried. I have known people call him an extortionate robber."

"The fellow's tongue is loosened by wine," thought Wheldrake; "another few glasses and I shall turn him inside out, like my glove, and find out what this scoundrel I have to deal with really is. Ah, my friend," he continued, turning to Giovanni, "rumour always lies. Fill a bumper, my friend to his excellency Count Patroceni,

whom his detractors call an exorbitant robber."

"The drunken fool will betray all," muttered Matteo. "I must take matters into my own hands and send for assistance."

"More wine, my good Matteo," cried Wheldrake, with assumed gaiety. "The Count's health, my friend! What was it you said your name was? Of course Giovanni is only a Christian name ——"

The unprepossessing farmer placed his elbows on the table, and, staring at Wheldrake with intense gravity, replied, "Giovanni, though the scum about here, and his excellency in particular, address me as Giovanni the Hog."

"And the scum are about right," interposed Matteo, sharply. "Ah," he sighed, "he has had quite enough; do not encourage him."

"Bah! my friend," cried Wheldrake, "go and get me another bottle; the respect-

able farmer and I are going to have a bout of it."

Matteo disappeared into the pavilion with a menacing frown at Giovanni as he passed his chair.

"Levies taxes! A score of good stalwart fellows," muttered Wheldrake. "What does this mean? The Count I know to be a thorough-paced villain. Why this extraordinary anxiety on the part of Matteo to explain away what this fellow says?"

"Come, my friend," cried Giovanni, as he pushed the bottle across, "another bumper to the 'King of the Road,' and success to his next venture!"

"Here's to the King of the Road," replied Wheldrake, with assumed drunkenness; "may the pockets of his next guests be well lined."

"*Mamma mia!* signor. What a sly little fellow you are. Why couldn't you say so at once?" he continued, winking. "You

are one of us, and the fools have set me to watch you."

"Ha, yes, a real good joke!" rejoined Wheldrake, laughing. "Help yourself. Only to think of his excellency making so great a mistake!"

"You know him well," said Giovanni, with that supernatural gravity that often seizes a drunken man.

"Know him? Yes, indeed; have drank with him, played with him ——"

"Played with him? Ha, ha, ha, ha!" cried Giovanni, with a peal of boisterous laughter. "Santo Diavolo played with him, and never won from him! Ho, Matteo, Matteo," continued the respectable farmer, "here's a man who has played cards with his excellency. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ah, signor," exclaimed Matteo, as he hurried in from the pavilion, in answer to Giovanni's call. "You must pay no attento his ravings. That drunken fool – a confirmed gambler. His excellency was once

good enough to humour him and play him for a quarter's rent. He lost, and ever since in his cups talks loudly of the Count's unparalleled luck."

"A quarter's rent," exclaimed Giovanni. "Ha, ha! he won me body and soul. Did you ever dice with the devil, Matteo? My head swims. Your wine is—— Signor, no more, it's poisoned," and as he spoke his head dropped on the table, and Giovanni's tongue was temporarily at rest.

"Oh, signor," said Matteo, reproachfully, "you should not have indulged him in his besetting sin. What can I get for you, signors?" and he turned to a couple of rough-looking men of the farming class, who had just entered.

"Sin!" exclaimed Wheldrake. "Nonsense, it raises a man's spirits; it makes him forget. Giovanni has forgotten, so shall I, soon," and so saying he finished his glass drowsily. "A pretty nest of scoundrels I have fallen amongst," he muttered, and

then throwing himself back in his chair, prepared apparently to sleep off the effects of his indulgence.

Matteo glanced at Wheldrake for a moment, and then said in a low tone to the new comers, "What orders do you bring?"

"That the Englishman is to be watched, and not allowed to leave here if you think he suspects anything."

"Suspects! If he does not, he is the most innocent, unsuspicious man I ever met. Hush! he sleeps now, but you must keep your eye upon him. Sit down at this adjoining table, and I will bring you your wine."

"What's gone wrong?" inquired one of the new comers, as the pair took their seats.

"That hog, Giovanni, who you can see is drunk as usual, has babbled in his cups. But are there no more of you? These Englishmen are difficult to handle."

"Oh, yes. On receipt of your message

his excellency sent up four of us. Pietro is behind the trees, and Giuseppe round the angle of the house ——"

"Enough. Mind, he is not to leave this," said Matteo, sharply. "You will take your orders from me, and above all be moderate with the bottle," and so saying Matteo went into the pavilion in quest of wine.

The moment he had left, Wheldrake gave a drowsy yawn, and rolling round in his chair turned his back upon the new comers.

"Now that prying landlord's back is turned I had best quietly take my departure. What that villain Patroceni really is seems evident. A gentleman of fashion in England, a mere bandit chief in his own country. an outcome probably of Garibaldi's raid and the upset of the Bourbons; this at all events is something to go upon. It will be news for Sir Jasper when he learns what manner of man Hammerton's friend was. Brigand, revolutionist, and evidently in the opinion of my intoxicated friend there an

adept with the cards. Some of Patroceni's people these two last arrivals, no doubt. However the man especially told off to watch me is past even watching the bottle. The others," and here he stole a glance at the occupants of the adjoining table, "seem to have devoted themselves pretty much to the same task. That lynx-eyed Matteo is out of the way. As good to chance it now as wait."

Wheldrake rose softly from his seat unobserved by the two new comers, who were absorbed in their wine and conversation, and was quietly making his way towards the entrance to the gardens, when, from the shrubberies adjacent to the pavilion, issued an apparently drunken man, who lurched heavily against him.

"Out of the way, you drunken swine!" cried Wheldrake, rashly.

"What ho! friends, will you see an old comrade insulted?" shouted the stranger.

The two men at the table sprang instantly to their feet, another appeared from round

the corner of the pavilion, and all three rushed instantly to the spot where Wheldrake was engaged in a scuffle with their comrade. Four against one, the odds were too much; and after a desperate struggle Wheldrake succumbed to his assailants, and was dragged back to the pavilion uttering cries for help.

"Santo Diavolo! we had better put a knife in him," growled one of the brigands.

"For your life, no. His excellency's orders are peremptory; he is to be made prisoner only."

"Ah, here's Matteo," rejoined one of the others, "he will tell us what to do."

"Quick, gag him, you fools!" cried Matteo. "Bring him in at once, and don't let him draw the whole gardens round us."

In another instant a cloak was thrown about the prisoner's head, and he was carried *vi et armis* into the pavilion.

CHAPTER XIV.

LA VICARIA.

The sun was sinking beneath the blue waters of the bay when Giovanni awoke from his drunken slumber and gazed vacantly around him. At first he had no very clear idea of where he was or what had taken place, but his bemazed mind gradually recovered itself, and he remembered that he had been despatched by his excellency to keep an eye upon the Englishman. He looked round, the Englishman was gone, and then a feeling of uneasiness almost amounting to terror came across him, for he was aware how merciless was the

chief he served. Giovanni was no coward, but he had a superstitious awe of Patroceni. With card or sword, pistol or die, he looked upon it as hopeless to struggle with the Count. Then the man had seen more than one example of Patroceni's relentless vengeance on those who had failed him. He was no coward, but a shiver ran through his bulky frame as he thought of rendering an account of his errand to his chief.

A craving for a cup of wine to steady his nerves, and a feverish desire to know the extent of his error, at last induced him to shout in somewhat uncertain tones, "Matteo, ho Matteo!"

Voice and manner were very different from those of the swaggering ruffian of some two or three hours ago.

"What is your pleasure, signor?" asked Matteo, as he issued from the pavilion.

"A cup of wine, Matteo, for Heaven's sake; and what has become of that accursed Englishman?"

"How should I know? What is he to me? It was your business to see to that, and it is you that his Excellency will look to for information on that point."

"The wine, Matteo, first. Ah, fool that I am! His Excellency never forgives. Do you think this was a matter of much consequence?"

"Yes, of very grave consequence to you," rejoined Matteo, sarcastically. "But I'll get you a cup of strong wine: no more flasks, remember," and Matteo disappeared into the house.

"Ah, yes!" muttered Giovanni. "His Excellency is of a sadly unforgiving temper. Corpo di Bacco! I don't relish meeting him at all. Thanks, friend Matteo," he continued, as the host reappeared with a tumbler of wine. "What would you recommend me to do—go back or not?"

"It is for you to decide," replied Matteo, with a shrug of his shoulders. "His Excellency punishes disobedience of orders pretty

sharply, and I wouldn't stand in your shoes, my friend, for a trifle. But, on the other side, remember his hand reaches far, and there is no safety round about these parts for the deserter."

Giovanni gave a shrug of his shoulders.

"That's true. A man must die when his turn comes; and to escape his Excellency's vengeance, ah, who can?" and the brigand finished the wine-cup. "Stop, Matteo, there is one way. It is possible yet to track this Englishman, eh? What became of him?"

"That matters little to you. He has been taken care of; but don't flatter yourself that his Excellency will fail to hear how you played watch-dog."

"I didn't think you would be so hard upon an old friend," replied Giovanni. "You might leave me to tell my own story."

"It's ill trying to keep secrets from his Excellency. Fool, do you think I am going

to get myself into trouble? Do you suppose a thing can be kept secret which is known to Pietro, Giuseppe, and the others?"

"What, were they here?"

"Who do you think secured the Englishman whilst you were senseless, in spite of all my warnings? I saw you were beginning to babble. You always do in your cups. The Englishman had learnt too much. It would have been dangerous to let him go."

"Ha! and they captured him. I'd best away to the forest at once, and make my confession to his Excellency. He'll perhaps ——"

"Put a bullet through those addled brains of yours," interrupted Matteo, sharply: "but it is possible—as, thanks to others, your mission was not a failure—he may overlook your—well, we'll say carelessness. But remember, Signor Giovanni, this is by no means the first instance of such carelessness, and although, in consideration of past ser-

vices, his Excellency has been lenient to your shortcomings, I'd recommend you not to count much further on it."

"It is hard, too, that a man's never to take his pleasure in this world," growled the brigand, as he rose from his chair.

"Take your pleasure, if stupefying yourself be so, only don't go to sleep when your orders are to keep your eyes open."

"Good-bye, Signor Matteo, your advice is as sound as your wine, though not half so pleasant to take;" and with these words Giovanni took his departure.

"He has courage," said Matteo to himself. "I have not, and the Count knows it; but I would sooner face a wild elephant than his Excellency after having bungled one of his commands in that fashion. It is possible I have seen Giovanni for the last time; but as we have not let the Englishman slip through our fingers the Count may forgive him. I wonder how the Englishman likes his new quarters? I don't know what he

has been used to, but it must have been very poor accommodation if his present satisfies him;" and with a cynical chuckle Matteo retired into his own domain.

Seated on a truckle-bed in a garret, situated in that most miserable part of that very miserable suburb of Naples called La Vicaria, is Wheldrake, puzzling his brain in vain endeavours to account for the restless animosity of Count Patroceni. That his kidnappers are emissaries of that nobleman, if such he be, admits of no manner of doubt. What can be his object in thus making him a prisoner? Money, he presumes. He knows enough about the habitudes of Italian brigands to know that the capture of people with means, and the exaction of a heavy ransom from either themselves or their friends, is the most lucrative part of their trade. But then, how on earth did Patroceni know of his arrival in Naples? He had not been above a few hours in the town, indeed his luggage had not yet arrived

to his knowledge. He had walked across from Pompeii, turned into the Villa del Reale, with a view to a rest and enjoying the glorious prospect of the Bay and its surroundings. Suddenly, in the words of Coleridge, "an exposition of sleep" fell upon him, and he asked Matteo for leave to lie down in the pavilion; the sequel we have seen.

As yet his captors had made no sign of their intentions. He had been hurried through the pavilion, taken rapidly out of the gardens under the guise of a drunken man—for such was the explanation given by his assailants to the few who manifested curiosity concerning the affair—and had now been detained under lock and key some twenty-four hours. That he had been brought some three or four miles he computed by the time it had taken the carriage into which he had been hustled the instant he was outside the Villa del Reale to traverse the distance. He did not even know where

he was; he only knew that he was under lock and key and closely watched. The villainous old hag who brought him his meals simply shook her head when interrogated; but Wheldrake could see, whenever the door was opened, there were always a couple of men on the alert to prevent anything like a sudden sortie on his part. Once or twice he had turned over in his mind the feasibility of a rush for freedom the next time the door was opened; but then he reflected that these double sentinels had plenty of comrades in all likelihood within call, and that, if he temporarily escaped from them, he had not the faintest idea of where he was.

One thing struck him as singular, and went far to prove that his captors were acting under the orders of Patroceni: all his personal property had been respected; watch, money, and rings no one had ever attempted to interfere with, though he had detected more than one rapacious glance cast

at his watch and chain by those who guarded him ; also he was treated with marked deference and civility. Squalid as was the room in which he was confined, there was an evident clumsy attempt to smarten it up ; while the food and wine supplied were far superior to the surroundings. Two or three days passed in this wise. Every morning he was visited by a man, not one of his captors, who, though courteously apologising for what he was pleased to term Wheldrake's inevitable detention, yet was always solicitous that any reasonable desire of his should be attended to, with the exception of restoring him his liberty. Papers, books, anything he demanded, with the exception of writing materials, to lighten his squalid captivity were freely supplied him, but vainly did he demand what was the reason of his unwarranted imprisonment. His head-gaoler simply shrugged his shoulders. His orders were that the prisoner should be made as comfortable as the cir-

cumstances admitted. When Wheldrake threatened that his country would demand severe account from the authors of this outrage, the supple Italian simply bowed and replied,

"Signor, I merely obey my orders. Has signor any further commands for me to-day?"

"Yes, why have I been thus kidnapped? When am I to be released?" he demanded hotly one morning.

"Ah, signor, I am but a subordinate, and do not know. My instructions are only to do the best I can to make your temporary detention as endurable as possible. It is with my superiors your friends or Government must reckon. But we are not much afraid of English interference on behalf of her citizens. Were you French or German it might be a different matter; *civis Romanus sum* hardly applies to your people."

Wheldrake started. This man, who claimed such knowledge of foreign politics, who was

he? Of education undoubtedly, and yet his dress hardly warranted the belief that he belonged to anything superior much to those *quasi* farmers who had kidnapped him in the Villa del Reale.

But to cross-examination the man was impervious, meeting every question with an imperturbable *Si, signor*, unless it related to something requisite to Wheldrake's comfort, when he at once assured him it should be promptly attended to.

Life had seemed pretty dreary before, but life in such squalid captivity as this was unendurable. In vain did he question his gaolers; they deprecated his wrath, implored his excellency to have patience, that he would be removed into the country in a few days, and have then no cause to complain of his accommodation; for the present, and here the head-warder shrugged his shoulders, they were doing their best to make things comfortable for him. It was a puzzle what could be Patroceni's reason for thus

persecuting him. A few days elapsed, and, growing dreadfully weary of his incarceration, Wheldrake was revolving in his mind many schemes for escape—that he was vigilantly guarded and escape by no means easy he had ascertained without doubt—when his head guardian announced to him at dinner, "The signor's annoyance is nearly ended; to-morrow he will be removed into the country, and then the remainder of his detention will be a mere nothing; there we shall be able to give the signor the accommodation and fresh air we regret so much we are unable to afford him here."

"But why am I detained, as you call it? What is it you want of me? I am a prisoner, apparently for no reason."

"Ah! signor, that will be explained to you in a day or two. If the signor will have patience a little, two days more and he will understand all."

If Wheldrake had been weary of his life before, and with such a terrible and un-

merited crash as had come to him it might be so, he was getting insufferably sick of it under present circumstances; but there was the wholesome difference in his feelings that instead of that dark apathy to things in general he now felt a healthy irritability at his enforced inaction. He was really taking a compulsory tonic, a medicine served out to us at times by the Fates without our in the least understanding it. Sloth and sluggishness have more than once been dissipated by such incentive to work as pecuniary difficulties; and, little as we may think it, the breaking of the bank that contains most of our eggs is not altogether bad for us at times. Wheldrake began to busy himself about compassing his escape. To bribe one of his gaolers was obviously the easiest way to effect this, and so communicate with the outer world; but then, unfortunately, Wheldrake had no outer world to communicate with. He knew no one in Naples. His sole chance lay in Chisel. He

had sent for his valet to London only a few weeks back, to that servant's great delight. He had left him at the inn at Pompeii, with instructions to follow with the baggage, and go to a leading hotel in Naples. Chisel was a shrewd man, and would be likely to raise considerable inquiry about the disappearance of his master. But on the other hand Wheldrake knew pretty well what the Italian police were, and that a case brought to them by a servant would be investigated with a deliberation that left little hope for the person chiefly interested. Plenty of time for his making a decent ending before the police took the matter into serious consideration. It was curious and characteristic of the ins and outs of human nature. Two weeks ago, and Wheldrake would have declared it mattered nothing what became of him. Now, on the contrary, it was a matter of great moment he should obtain his freedom.

His obtaining his freedom was subject of

conjecture; but his changing the hot stifling room in which he was confined was, as his head-gaoler assured him, an affair of days.

"To-morrow, signor, you will leave this for the country. I regret that we shall be compelled to disturb you at daybreak," said the apparent chief of his immediate captors, and who was treated with great deference by his subordinates, under the title of Signor Sarini; "but it is rather a long and tedious journey. The roads are not quite what they should be. Still I feel sure you will appreciate the pure air and lovely scenery of the place you are about to visit."

"Visit!" rejoined Wheldrake, fiercely. "The place to which I am to be dragged, in defiance of all law and justice. What is it you seek—my life, my money—say? It is hardly worth while to remove me out of this room to take either the one or the other."

"Don't be so bitter, signor. There are

reasons for your temporary detention; but, believe me, your life is in no danger."

"And by what right do you deprive me of my liberty?" asked Wheldrake, angrily.

"Ah, signor, by that great right which is the cause of most injustice on this earth, the right of the strong to oppress the weak. You are in our hands as the people are for the most part in the hands of their rulers. Did the Bourbons, think you, show much mercy during their rule over us? Ah, signor, neither life, property, nor the honour of our wives and daughters were safe while those tyrants had power to gratify their caprices. At daybreak to-morrow, excellency."

It was now evident to Wheldrake that he was in the hands of a somewhat mixed community; that, while the subordinates could claim no higher rank than that of ordinary bandits, their chiefs were men who had been concerned prominently in the great revolutionary movement that took its rise in '48.

He had always heard Patroceni credited with being deeply involved in all the many convulsions that Italy went through before shaking off the yoke of the worse race that, perhaps, with the exception of the Stuarts, ever were set over their fellows.

Wheldrake was roused at daybreak the next morning, and informed that he had a short half-hour to swallow the coffee brought to him, and prepare for his journey. He was soon up and ready. Sarini escorted him downstairs with all the deference and courtesy that a groom of the chambers might have shown, but Wheldrake caught sight of divers "respectable farmers" about, two of whom occupied the box of the carriage, and two more who were prepared to accompany it on horseback. There was no help for it; he was off apparently to spend a few days with His Excellency, Count Patroceni.

CHAPTER XV.

MAUDE'S MISGIVINGS.

"When I travel," said Mrs. Fullerton, "I do like to see what there is to be seen. Did not somebody say, 'See Naples and die?' I don't want to. I want to see Herculaneum and Pompeii, and get up no end of enthusiasm about those grand old Romans."

"Awfully over-rated race!" rejoined Glanfield, who was lounging in the window of the hotel sitting-room, and languidly surveying the vagaries of the Villa del Reale, and the bright blue waters of the famous bay in the background.

"Mr. Glanfield!" exclaimed the widow

"do you really mean you have no veneration for the past, and one of the nations that have bequeathed us the chief elements of civilisation."

"Beg pardon, Mrs. Fullerton, but I haven't any great veneration for the past, especially for a people whose ideas about horse-racing seem to have been so lamentably crude. The Greeks, with their Olympiads, were a long way in front of them. The Romans were simply a fraud."

"Mr. Glanfield, how can you talk such nonsense?" replied the widow, briskly. "Nobody disputes the Romans were a great race."

"No," rejoined Glanfield, drily, "because nobody, as a rule, takes the trouble to think. They went about the world colonising, just as we do; thrashed what they were pleased to term the 'barbarians,' just as we thrash the Abyssinians or Ashantees, who have neither arms nor discipline to cope with us; bragged about the success of their armies just as we

do: the success being the result of the trained, practised gladiator against the undisciplined, ignorant yokel. All mere force. They were pretty good road-makers, and that's all. We have had a man or two pretty good in the same line—Wade, only remembered by the old epigram—

> 'If you'd seen these roads before they were made,
> You would call down blessings on General Wade.'

And MacAdam, who I curse with all my heart, whenever I am in London, for the state his system has reduced some thoroughfare or other, essential to my happiness."

"Mr. Glanfield, you don't mean really to pretend these are your real sentiments?"

"Mr. Glanfield must have had a respect for Horace and Virgil knocked into him at Harrow," said Maude, laughing.

"Now that's just what he hadn't," replied Glanfield. "I'd a great dislike of those poets pretty roughly instilled into me.

I learnt to hate Virgil with his prosing about the pious Æneas, who, by the way, was no better than the rest of us when he got the slightest temptation to bolt out of the course; and as for Horace, he was no doubt a jolly good fellow, but the more we knew of him the less respect we felt for him."

"They were a grand race, Mr. Glanfield," said Mrs. Fullerton, with much dignity, "and I intend to see those relics of their greatness at Herculaneum and Pompeii."

"Quite right!" replied Mr. Glanfield, "there are some relics of their greatness there not shown as a rule to ladies. Another curious thing to show how little new there is under the sun, they loaded their dice quite as artistically as any macer in London could now."

"Macer!" exclaimed Mrs. Fullerton.

"I beg your pardon. I mean a man who does not always play on the square, one might say rarely."

"Well," said Sir Jasper, laughing, "we must see these places, of course, and, from all I can gather, Glanfield will prove a first-rate *cicerone*."

At this moment Hammerton entered the apartment, and, upon being informed of the subject of discussion, said emphatically,—"Of course we must go to Pompeii, nobody ever comes to Naples without doing it. I will arrange all about the carriages, &c., to-morrow."

"Fancy we had better have an escort, Hammerton; there are a good many of the light-fingered gentry about; some of the revolutionaries of '48 and the following years, who pick up a precarious living by entrapping the unwary."

"Brigands! pooh, nonsense; the age of brigandage has gone by. An escort would be a bore and superfluity ——"

"Don't know about a bore," rejoined Glanfield, quietly. "A compulsory residence in the mountains, with a good deal of

money to pay for one's release, would be a greater nuisance."

"My dear Glanfield, this is a thing of the past, I assure you. Brigandage is a thing almost unknown in the present day."

"These old—well, what shall I say, habits or vices die hard. People are very conservative over such little matters, and are wont to think the exaction of tribute from the passing stranger a laudable custom. We do it in London, only in a different fashion—overcharge him in the bill. Same thing, only more delicately put to him."

"But surely, Mr. Glanfield," exclaimed Maude, "brigands really are merely legendary in these days."

"Just the sort of legend you find still in full bloom in this sort of country. However, Hammerton knows the Continent much better than I do; if he don't think an escort necessary no doubt it isn't."

"All rubbish, paying a lot of greasy, swaggering beggars to pretend there's dan-

ger. No, no, we can take care of ourselves. An impudent mendicant is about the most obtrusive brigand we are likely to run across."

"Just what these fellows are—impudent mendicants got together—mendicants who've swarmed," said Glanfield. "However, they're probably things of the past, though it might be as well to inquire of the police on the subject."

"Never any use consulting the police in this country on such a subject. They either don't know, or are in collusion with the enemy. Take my word for it, all this sort of thing is quite of the past."

"Very good, then," interposed Sir Jasper. "We'll make an excursion to Pompeii to-morrow. You'll see about all the necessary arrangements, Fred?"

"All right, uncle. You will enjoy our excursion immensely, Maude. With your veneration for the ancients it is sure to interest you."

A pained look shot across the girl's face, not unnoticed by Mrs. Fullerton, who rightly interpreted it. She knew her niece was thinking of Cyril, with whom this very trip ought to have been taken. It was curious how by mere choice Maude drifted along the very path which Wheldrake in all the elation of his triumph had proposed should constitute his bridal tour. Had Hammerton reflected on all this, he was shrewd enough to understand, that, if you wish a girl to forget, it is stupid to take her amongst scenes or surroundings that infallibly recall her lost lover to her recollection. Maude was slowly awakening to the fact that her cousin wished her to be something more than that to him, and the idea frightened the girl. To her it seemed like sacrilege to think that the memory of Cyril could be so soon put on one side; she could hardly even believe that Hammerton himself could wish it. Surely if the love was worth winning it could not be transferred with such

rapidity as this would amount to; yet still she fancied that her cousin unmistakably desired to fill Cyril's place. This reason alone would have sufficed to make the tour distasteful to her, and yet she knew it could scarcely be brought to an abrupt conclusion. It was not easy for the girl under present circumstances to avoid Fred Hammerton's attentions. He was cunning, insomuch as he kept upon that borderland which never quite committed him. He could always fall back with the assertion that his attentions were merely cousinly; but Maude knew just as well as Hammerton himself did that they were calculated to mislead the lookers-on; that friends who had met them exchanged significant glances when they saw Hammerton talking to her; and nothing corroborated this idea so much as the fact that even her aunt, Mrs. Fullerton, who enjoyed most of her confidence, was evidently rather staggered. Mrs. Fullerton had believed that her niece was still staunch to her old love, but so insi-

dious was Hammerton in his attentions that even she began to doubt whether Maude did not tacitly encourage them. The girl's sole defence under these circumstances consisted in Mr. Glanfield, and even that to a great extent failed her. It was all very well to affect a desire for his society in order to ward off Hammerton's attentions, but then Glanfield was considerably monopolised by her aunt, and, what is more, seemed to submit to that monopoly with much satisfaction. If Mrs. Fullerton's intention was matrimony there was no doubt that this trip gave her vast opportunities. Glanfield, deprived of what might be called his natural resource, racing, submitted himself to the widow's dictation without resistance. She amused him, and that to an Englishman thrown adrift on the Continent means much. He hated sight-seeing, cared nothing whatever about picture-galleries, spoke no language but his own, and had that fine insular contempt for foreigners very preva-

lent about the beginning of the century, therefore to him Mrs. Fullerton was rapidly becoming a necessity; no more insidious way than this of conquering the confirmed bachelor. He doesn't mean matrimony in the least—he simply drifts into it. Girls think that a good tennis-player or ball-room partner is a great attraction to a man; but if they wish he should think seriously of marrying let them teach him to value their society rather higher than that—let him find that their absence makes his days dreary. We all know what it costs to abandon an accustomed luxury, and perhaps no greater luxury exists than the companionship of a clever woman.

Hammerton set himself to work that afternoon to make every arrangement for an excursion to Pompeii. He gave all the necessary orders about carriages, and, though scorning to consult the police, did make some inquiries as to the possibility of encountering brigands, but it was very diffi-

cult to get anything like a straightforward answer from the people of the hotel. Gentlemen took escorts and gentlemen did not. There was no reason to suppose there was any necessity to do so, but of course the signor would do as he thought best; upon which Hammerton pooh-poohed all ideas of an escort, and ordered the carriages for the next morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COUNT AT HOME.

After a drive of about an hour the carriage which contained Wheldrake came to a stop, and it was intimated to him that he was to alight. The carriage was sent back to Naples, and Signor Sarini informed him that he would have to accomplish the remainder of his journey on foot. To his inquiry of whether they had far to go he was told some distance. He fancied he recognised the road to Pompeii, but his captors speedily left the high road and struck into paths known only to themselves. Some half-dozen rough-looking men of the peasant type, but all well armed, and evidently

resolved to stand no nonsense, surrounded him. Wheldrake was an active young man in his prime and accustomed to hard exercise, but he found it taxed his powers to keep pace with his companions, who, he gathered, had strong reasons for haste. Now and again they stopped and anxiously interrogated the goat-herds whom they occasionally passed. Apparently the answers they received were satisfactory, for, as they put a further distance between themselves and Naples, they sensibly relaxed their speed. The country through which they were passing now was wild and mountainous, but well wooded and evidently very sparsely inhabited, and it was clear to Wheldrake that he was being hurried further and further from the haunts of men, though with what object he was unable to conjecture. His rough tourist suit and laced boots were not calculated to give the idea of his being a man of property, while at the same time, had it been intended to treat him in ordinary brigand

fashion, it was strange he should have been allowed to retain his watch and what money he had about him. He could hardly have been regarded as a man able to pay a heavy ransom, unless his captors had some private information about him which led them to suppose him likely to meet a pretty stiff estimate as to the price of his freedom. Still, foreigners always have an exaggerated idea of an Englishman's wealth. And another thing Wheldrake did not know was, that the particular class of foreigners with whom he was at present travelling always believe that an Englishman's country will in the end be sure to find the sum necessary for his redemption. It was quite in accordance with all he ever had heard of the customs of brigandage to hurry its prisoners to the mountains while entering into negociations for their release. In short, the more he turned it over in his own mind the less conclusion Wheldrake was able to come to as to the cause of his captivity. At last his captors

stopped for the night near a spring of clear water, by the side of which stood a rough-looking hovel. A shrill whistle given by one of their party was speedily replied to, and their numbers were augmented by two more gentlemen of similar appearance to themselves. A short hurried conversation with the new comers ended in their producing some provisions and wine-flasks from the interior of the unpromising looking hut, and Wheldrake was then invited to partake of a rough but substantial supper, and, that despatched, was given to understand that he was at liberty to go to sleep whenever he pleased. As for the brigands, they threw themselves on the ground like men thoroughly habituated to sleeping in the open air, not forgetting to leave one of their number as sentry. Wheldrake, who was thoroughly tired with his journey, speedily followed their example. Escape would have been no easy thing even if he had felt disposed to attempt it. He would have had not

only to defy the vigilance of the sentry, but in a country totally unknown to him would in all probability have been speedily recaptured. As it was he slept sounder than he had done since first made a prisoner. His companions were up at daybreak, and, after a hasty meal, once more resumed their journey. In answer to his inquiries he was told that he would reach his destination in the course of the day. It was pretty much a repetition of yesterday's journey, but towards the afternoon his captors were evidently nearing their halting-place. At last, after climbing a hill clothed with thickish wood, they emerged on a grassy plateau which was evidently their head-quarters. The encampment was small, and the probability was that the hardy ruffians who resided there slept for the most part with the sky for their canopy. Still on the left was a neat well-built hut, whilst on the right were a couple of good-sized tents. On this same side were the traces of small fires which had

probably been used for cooking purposes. In the foreground, scattered about, were some fourteen or fifteen men, sleeping, smoking, cleaning their arms, or playing cards. On the upper part of the plateau at the back of the hut might be seen an easy chair and a small table, on which were some few books and writing materials, and it was noticeable that this portion of the plateau seemed carefully avoided by the whole band. The chair was empty, nor was any one visible at the open doors of either hut or tents. There was a brief conversation between Sarini and one or two of the denizens of the encampment, and then Wheldrake was ordered to enter the tent on the extreme right of the plateau. It was evident that some preparations had been made for his reception, although somewhat of the roughest. A truckle-bed, a rough table and a chair, and some scanty washing apparatus on an empty packing-case in one corner of the marquee, constituted the furniture, but on the table was a

well-worn edition of "Gil Blas," together with a couple of French novels and a pack of cards. Wheldrake was then informed by Sarini that he would not be permitted to leave the tent without permission; and, pointing significantly to the sentry at the door, added he trusted the signor would make no infringement upon that order, and so avoid all disagreeable consequences. His excellency would be at once informed of his (Wheldrake's) arrival, and it was very probable would be anxious to see him before long.

Wheldrake had not long to wait. He was considerately allowed an hour or so to rest, and then Sarini once more appeared and requested Wheldrake to follow him. A singular *tableau* was presented to the eye as they emerged from the marquee. Seated in the chair at the back of the plateau was a man whom Wheldrake immediately recognised as Patroceni. On the other side of the table was Giovanni, standing in the

attitude of one who has made up his mind to face the consequences of his misdeeds with determination. Between him and Patroceni was a man speaking volubly and with all that rapid gesticulation common to the Italian when moved; while grouped around at a respectful distance, but listening intently to Matteo's animated description, were the remainder of the band, numbering between twenty and thirty. Wheldrake spoke Italian indifferently, but like most people understood it much better than he could speak it. Besides, Matteo's animated pantomime showed that he was telling the story of Giovanni's frailty. At last he ceased, and the brigands craned eagerly forward to see the next act of the drama.

Patroceni rose quietly from his chair, and in a moment his deep-toned voice rang clear and resonant through the pure mountain air.

"Giovanni," he said, "you know our laws; the one you have broken is punish-

able more or less in every military brotherhood that ever existed. Among men who carry their lives in their hands, like ourselves, the penalty is death. The drunkenness of any one of us on service may result in the destruction of the remainder. I have spared your life, forfeited for this transgression already once, in consideration of the good service you did that day at Amalfi. This time I mean to give you a bare chance of it. I ought to shoot you where you stand, but instead I'll try the thickness of that numskull of yours, and may God grant it to be thick enough to save you from the fate you merit," and as he spoke the Count, who was habited in rather a dandified bandit attire, drew a pistol from his belt, and, taking it by the barrel, dealt Giovanni a blow with the butt that stretched the brigand senseless on the grass.

A long-drawn breath went up from the lookers-on.

"Santo Diavolo! but his Excellency

strikes hard," muttered one of them. "He might as well have shot him at once; he'll never recover from such a crack on the head as that."

"Tush! Giovanni's skull is pretty thick, and, though it may ache for some two or three days, he will be well enough again in a week," rejoined another.

"He'll carry the mark of the Count's handwriting to his grave whether he recover or no," said a third.

"Pleasant this!" thought Wheldrake. "The last time I met this man I called him a liar. The vengeful disposition of the Italians is proverbial, and I am utterly in his power."

"Take him away, some of you," said the Count with a wave of his hand at the prostrate bandit, "and if necessary bury him. Matteo, you have done good service, and those that serve me well know that I am not forgetful. Return now to Naples in case the information you bring should again

prove of no use. The excursion of the English lord has been postponed once, and, in spite of what you hear, may be postponed again. Get back as quickly as you can and be all eyes and ears."

With a low reverence Matteo turned away, and, crossing the plateau, plunged into the wood, while with another wave of his hand Patroceni dismissed his band. Wheldrake was about also to return to his tent when a quiet "The signor will remain" caused him to retain his ground.

"Ah, Sarini," said the Count, suavely, "I see you have persuaded this shy friend of mine to at last visit me. The last time we met he expressed a desire to do so. He had had a bad night at cards and was anxious for his revenge. Welcome, Signor Wheldrake, to my country seat. You must take us a little in the rough, but you shall have the best we can give you."

"I am your prisoner, Count Patroceni, and of course at your mercy," rejoined

Wheldrake. "I flung hard words at your head the last time we met, and, from what I have just witnessed, have little doubt I shall now have to reckon for them."

"Ah!" said the Count, proudly, "that shows how little you understand me. Words of insult I settle with the utterer, man for man, as is customary between gentlemen. You are here, sir, chiefly because you took advantage of a fool's inebriety to learn my secrets. I wished to meet you for reasons of my own, but you may thank your own curiosity mainly for your present detention."

"And may I ask how long that is likely to last?" inquired Wheldrake.

"I regret I cannot quite say," replied the Count. "I am daily expecting some friends of yours. Ah, yes, Signor Wheldrake, you will find it quite a family party. It will quite recall Wrottsley to your recollection, though I am afraid I can't give you quite such a day's shooting as we had that day at

the what-you-call-it—Clanger's, Sanger's, or something like that."

"Hangers," said Wheldrake, shortly.

"Ah, yes, if I could only ask that clergyman who got angry it would be quite complete," continued the Count, laughing heartily.

"You issue your invitations in a somewhat singular fashion," rejoined Wheldrake, curtly.

"True," replied the Count. "I hate refusals. I always send *pressing* invitations."

"I presume my detention is a mere question of money?" rejoined Wheldrake, haughtily, "and, if so, Count Patroceni, the sooner you acquaint me with the conditions of my release the better I shall be pleased."

"Oh, fie! Signor Wheldrake. You are scarcely courteous. Do you take me for an innkeeper who sends in his bill when his guest calls for it. No, you will partake of my hospitality for a few days. I have quite

a pleasant party to meet you when we are all assembled. Any books I have are at your disposal, although I am sorry to say my library here is somewhat limited. Besides, we will have a little baccarat to while away the time. Signor Sarini here is fond of the game, and an accomplished player at it. For the present, Signor Wheldrake, I have the honour to wish you adieu," and with a quiet bow Patroceni turned and walked away in the direction of the hut.

"I think, signor," said Sarini, "you cannot do better than follow his Excellency's example,"—a hint with which Wheldrake immediately complied.

What can it all mean? he thought, as he seated himself on his bed. He brands me cheat and cardsharper at Wrottsley, and now proposes to play baccarat with me again.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN EXCURSION TO AMALFI.

The sudden indisposition of Maude had postponed the contemplated excursion to Pompeii. She had had a slight feverish attack, and the doctors prescribed quiet, but the girl soon rallied, and Mrs. Fullerton became once more anxious to get on classic ground.

"My dear Maude!" exclaimed that vivacious lady, "I do think now that you are well enough to take part in our contemplated expedition to Pompeii."

"Quite, auntie, and as anxious for it as you can be. I am quite equal to starting to-morrow, if it can be arranged."

"I must speak to Fred about it," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "He organised the affair before, and no doubt will do so again. I wonder whether he could manage it for to-morrow."

Hammerton, upon being appealed to, declared there was no difficulty about it whatever, but suggested they should make a regular outing of it; see Pompeii, &c., and then go on to Amalfi, sleep there, and return next day. "It will be a delightful excursion, if you don't mind roughing it a little ——"

"Oh, no," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton, gaily, "I am quite good for that. We women can always bear the loss of our little comforts with much greater resignation than you men. Oh dear! how you do groan if there is any rumpling of the rose-leaves ——"

"Know one point, though," remarked Glanfield, putting up his eye-glass, "we rather beat you on. We bear being

disappointed by our tailor better than you bear being disappointed by your milliner."

"Of course you do," rejoined Mrs. Fullerton. "Our dress is a matter of paramount importance; yours quite a secondary consideration. However, Maude, I suppose we needn't adorn much for this trip."

"I don't know," said Glanfield. "Messieurs the brigands may be connoisseurs in female beauty, and in case of accidents we shall look to the influence of your charms to protect us."

"Don't, pray, talk such nonsense, Glanfield. You are only making the ladies causelessly nervous, I was talking the other day to an intelligent fellow, who keeps one of the pavilions in the Villa del Reale, and where I often take a cup of coffee, and he quite smiled at the idea of brigands between this and Amalfi. No, I'll order the carriages for to-morrow, if that'll do, uncle?"

"That will suit every body, I think," replied Sir Jasper. "You must make up your mind to do without your maids, ladies."

"It's a trial," said Mrs. Fullerton, with much resignation; "but for once ——"

"You must make up your mind to appear as God made you," interrupted Glanfield.

"The monster!" cried the widow. "Do you hear him, Maude? Mr. Glanfield would insinuate that he has never seen us save as fashioned by our maids."

"Ten thousand pardons, Mrs. Fullerton. You don't understand me. Beauty, when unadorned, &c., is all a mistake. A pretty woman looks all the better for the assistance of the milliner. A pretty woman, well-groomed—I mean well-dressed, is far better worth looking at than the Venus of Milo. I haven't seen it, and don't want to, but Lord Byron, I presume, had, and I agree with him. Doesn't he say—

> 'I've seen live women, ripe and real,
> Worth all the wonders of their stone ideal,'

or something like it."

The widow was completely mollified by this change of front. She was many years younger than her brother, and knew that she was a very good-looking woman still, albeit a little full-blown. She smiled sweetly on Mr. Glanfield as she replied :—

"Well, for once it is understood we dispense with the accessories of the toilet. What sacrifices we make, Maude, in our pursuit of the antique."

"Which is contrary to the custom of your sex, Clara. Woman usually makes her sacrifices to avoid the antique;" and the Baronet chuckled heartily at his own joke. "I shall only take Jackson, then; we shall find one servant useful," and, so saying, Sir Jasper left the room.

"Jackson useful!" ejaculated Hammerton as the door closed. "Why the obstinate

old fool has ceased to be that for many years, but here he's a positive encumbrance. I declare he takes as much looking after as all the rest of you. Isn't it so, Glanfield?"

"Yes, high time he was taken out of harness and turned out to grass," responded that gentleman.

"Which means, Mr. Glanfield ——?" said Mrs. Fullerton, sternly—

"Beg pardon, I forgot myself: that it is about time old Jackson was pensioned off. There is no tyranny so unsupportable as that of an old servant."

"Poor old Jackson!" interposed Maude, indignantly. "I won't have him run down in this way. Why, I can recollect him as long as I can recollect anything. He used to give me surreptitious sweetmeats when I was a child. He can't help growing old, and it would hurt him dreadfully to suggest that he was not as fit for his work as formerly. Of course out here he don't understand things."

"He understands how to grumble," retorted Hammerton, for an instant forgetting his *rôle* of lover; "a more cross-grained old brute and intolerable nuisance people travelling for amusement never were burdened with."

"Considering you've known him from a boy, Fred, you might have a little more patience with the old man's infirmities," retorted Maude, and with a slight toss of her head she left the room.

Hammerton saw his mistake at once, but he had been so long accustomed to patronise his cousin that to play the lover came a little difficult to him. He occasionally forgot his part, and, anxious not to accept him in that character, Maude, with feminine quickness, invariably pounced upon such opportunities as this gave her.

"Who would have thought of Maude taking up the cudgels so hotly on behalf of that imbecile?" exclaimed Hammerton, with a rather forced laugh. "But I must

go and see about the carriages for to-morrow."

"If Fred is really making love to Maude, he rather put his foot in it that time," remarked Mrs. Fullerton, after Hammerton had left the room.

"Why you surely don't think for one moment that he has the slightest notion of anything of that sort?" exclaimed Glanfield.

"Yes, I think he's a great idea of something of that sort," replied the widow, mimicking him. "I've no more doubt that he is making love to Maude than I have that you are making love to me."

"What!" cried Mr. Glanfield, almost bounding from his chair.

"Oh, don't be frightened," said Mrs. Fullerton, with a ringing laugh. "I know you mean nothing by it, and I don't mind it. You look quite overcome by the discovery: ring for a glass of wine," and with another peal of laughter the widow made her exit.

As for Mr. Glanfield, he remained for some minutes in a state of almost stupor. If he had been making love it had been most unwittingly. Absurd! This must be some of Mrs. Fullerton's badinage. She was a charming woman, a most agreeable companion. He had enjoyed her society extremely, despite her perpetually finding fault with his racing slang, but hang it all! no, he'd never made love to her. Then was she right about Hammerton's making love to Maude. Glanfield was very fond of Maude, and had but a very poor opinion of Hammerton. It was the instinctive repugnance a high-minded honourable man has for one whose ways are crooked; and, though Glanfield had never heard anything alleged against Fred Hammerton, he felt pretty sure that he was tolerably unscrupulous. He did not all relish the idea of his pet Maude being won by such a man as he deemed Hammerton to be. Still, surely she could not have forgotten Cyril Wheldrake; and

here Mr. Glanfield shook his head, and with the mental observation of how much more difficult women were to understand than horses strolled out of the sitting-room.

The next morning at an early hour the whole party were astir and ready for their expedition. It was resolved that Sir Jasper and Hammerton should occupy the first carriage, with Jackson on the box, while Mrs. Fullerton, Maude, and Glanfield followed in the second. It had been settled that they should travel in light marching order, so that the *impedimenta*, including a comfortable basket of comestibles and a hamper of wine, were soon comfortably packed away.

Opposite the hotel door a man was adjusting the bridle of his horse. He was on the far side of the road, near one of the gates of the Villa del Reale, and that bridle had for some time apparently puzzled him — no getting it to his liking anyhow; but as the carriages rolled beneath the portico of the hotel that discontented horseman seemed to

solve the Gordian knot. In another moment that bridle was adjusted, and, having swung himself into the saddle, the horseman rapidly disappeared in the direction of Pompeii.

"For'ard, for'ard!" cried Sir Jasper, as, accompanied by Glanfield, he made his appearance on the steps of the hotel.

"Good gracious, Jasper!" said his sister, as she emerged from the door immediately afterwards, glowing with satisfaction at the conviction that her neat travelling-dress was unimpeachable, "we're not going to cover, you know, and the people here really do not understand the fox-hunter's shibboleth."

The fair widow was delightful. No male creature ever failed to some extent to yield to her fascinations, but her mission was to suppress sporting jargon, and she was staunch to her mission.

"I think we are really now quite ready, Maudie, eh?" she said, interrogatingly; "though, having required us to leave our

handmaidens behind us, you can never expect us to be *quite* ready again till we return. Never mind, we are decked for the sacrifice."

"Rather nicely decked, too," remarked Glanfield; "you and Maude both look as fit as hands can make you."

"Fit! Mr. Glanfield," said the widow, with an assumption of intense gravity.

"Yes, fit as hands can make you," rejoined Glanfield, quite unabashed. "I suppose it is your milliners who do fit you, and that they have hands ——"

"Such equivocation as that, Mr. Glanfield, will be remembered against you," said Mrs. Fullerton, sternly, as she stepped into the carriage. "I regret it, but in justice to my sex I must retaliate on the first opportunity."

But Sir Jasper gave the signal for starting, and the carriages rolled onwards. After a delicious, though somewhat hot drive, Pompeii was reached at last, and,

after a cursory examination of its wondrous remains, the party snatched a hasty luncheon, and then proceeded to push on to Amalfi, promising themselves to complete their study of Pompeii on the return journey. Soon after leaving Pompeii a horseman passed them.

"By Jove!" exclaimed Hammerton, "I believe that is my friend of the pavilion in the Villa del Reale. Hi, Matteo—Signor Matteo!"

But the horseman, whoever he was, paid no heed to Hammerton's hail, but trotted on, and was soon lost round a turn of the road. They had got by this time in a well-wooded, but hilly country, and were descending a steepish dip, at the bottom of which ran a brooklet, now some four or five feet wide, and perhaps as many inches in depth, but which it was easy to imagine an impassable torrent in winter. On the far side of this the road wound upwards through a thick wood—forest would perhaps better

describe the mass of grand old trees and picturesque glades that fringed the ascent on either side.

Glanfield, who had sore misgivings that the days of brigandage were by no means over, was just thinking that if any of those gentry were about a more appropriate place in which to cry "Stand and deliver" he had never set eyes on, when he heard the word "Stop"—that is to say its Italian equivalent—shouted in sonorous tones.

"Off your box, and go to your horses' heads, or I fire!" cried the speaker, sternly.

"Drive on, you scoundrel!" thundered Sir Jasper.

"Police! police!" shouted Jackson.

Glanfield sprang to his feet, and looked at the carriage in front. The driver had tumbled off his box with almost suspicious alacrity. Sir Jasper and Hammerton were standing up in the carriage, while on a small hillock at the end of the wood stood a man, whose carbine was now apparently levelled

at Jackson, who was writhing on the box like a cockchafer with a pin through it, at the sight of that ominous barrel covering him at about twenty paces, and still continuing to vociferate police! as he would have done if assaulted in Mayfair. Across the road were drawn some half-dozen men, armed with muskets, who evidently only awaited the behests of their leader; while others were visible on the edge of the road on either side. Glanfield glanced back, but four sturdy ruffians resting on their guns barred retreat in that direction.

"Please don't be frightened!" he exclaimed. "They won't hurt us, but merely hold us prisoners till ransomed; but we are in the hands of brigands, caught like rats in a trap. Resistance is useless, Sir Jasper," he shouted; "the rascals are in far too great force for us to make a fight of it."

"The signor is sensible," replied Sarini, for he was the leader of the bandits. "You are perfectly safe if you make no resistance.

Struggle against the inevitable, and don't blame me if your skins suffer."

He spoke in Italian, but it was of course evident that he understood English.

"Glanfield is right," said Hammerton. "There is nothing for it but to submit. Four unarmed men can't fight twenty with guns in their hands. Hold your tongue, you old idiot, you don't suppose there's a gendarme within ten miles, do you?"

"There's a gun within ten yards, Mr. Fred, pointed dead at me. Do ask him to put it down. These foreigners are so careless with firearms."

Hammerton, who, with the exception of Mrs. Fullerton, was the only one of the party who could speak Italian, called out to Sarini that they surrendered, and the guns were then lowered. Sarini ordered them all to descend from the carriages. The brigands removed the baggage with a celerity that betokened much habitude to the unrighteous shifting of trunks and properties, and then

the drivers of the carriages were sternly ordered to continue their way to Amalfi, and on no account to return before the third day from that time.

Sarini then intimated to Hammerton that the party must pursue its way on foot, that they had not far to go, and that in consideration of the ladies they would proceed leisurely, while old Jackson was given to understand that any further lifting of his voice would necessitate his being gagged.

"Do you think they'll draw our teeth, Mr. Glanfield, if we don't fork out sufficiently, like that king in the history of England did? He was a good deal in the bandit line, wasn't he, sir?"

END OF VOL. I.

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